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MID FEBRUARY, 1938 EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

WEST

Every Other Friday One Shilling

CONTENTS

PAGE

BEYOND MIDNIGHT CHASM — DENVER BARDWELL — 4

With all the fires of hell consuming him Joe Raglin, disgraced ex-Ranger, rode into the outlaws' hideout with his six-guns blazing.

GUNS ALONG THE CIMARRON — DENVER BARDWELL — 59

The story of a novel method of tracking down a powerfully organised rustler outfit.

THE OTHER VALLEY — HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS — 76

How Bedrock and his sixteen-year-old partner, Young Hardesty, managed to cope with a very difficult situation.

KING OF THE BORDER BADMEN — O. RANDAL DANE — 88

A girl's life is saved and a gang is punished.

HOPALONG CASSIDY TAKES CARDS (CONCLUSION) — CLARENCE E. MULFORD — 100

A reg'lar, hand-painted, embroidered posse, fancy as hell, takes on the job of invading Box Canyon.

ADVENTURERS ALL — JAMES B. HENDRYX — 124

James Asasela—an anomaly.

MEN, SHIPS AND SEAS — J. GREGORY CLAIRE — 127

By

DENVER BARDWELL

With all the fires of Hell consuming him, Joe Raglin, disgraced ex-Ranger, rode into the outlaw hideout with his six-guns blazing. He rode, not to bring back Bull Orson, the Owl-hooter who had killed his brother, and disgraced him, but to kill the bandit chief and the band of vultures who had turned Plentiful Valley into a renegades Paradise.

CHAPTER I

THE singing sands had been left far behind. The mountain heights had been reached and passed. Now Joe Raglin stood beside his dust-stained, long-barrelled black horse beside a rippling mountain brook and looked down upon the green verdure of Plentiful Valley.

The desert-burned eyes of the first home-seeking immigrants had looked down from these heights upon that scene of abundant green life and saw in it a promise of Paradise. They had named it in their simple language and it had ever since remained Plentiful Valley. Because of that very abundance of life and plenty, it had become the prey of those who take without recompense.

While he waited for his handsome black racer to drink and rest for a little while, Joe Raglin took from his leather vest pocket a letter from his brother and read it over for the twentieth time.

Dear Joe,

I heard how they dropped you from the Rangers because Bull Orson and his wild bunch got the drop on you and took your guns away. I'm still for you as strong as I ever was. I heard somewhere that it's said as how a man is wise who knows how

BEYOND MIDNIGHT CHASM

to run and live to fight another day. Well, Joe, that's just why I'm writing this letter. It would a been plumb foolish to throw your life away when you had no chance to fight back. Now you got a chance to fight back. Here's the lay, Joe.

Webb Gude is the big mogul in Angelita, our biggest town in Plentiful Valley. He come in here and got himself elected city marshal two years back. Nobody knew where he come from, or nothing about him. He was just a fast trigger man and that's sure what the easy-going citizens thought they needed for city marshal. Well, I can't tell you the whole story in a letter, but can tell you plenty if you come up. When he got to riding high and mighty, telling us cowmen what we could and couldn't do in Angelita —mostly it was what we couldn't do— some of us got to nosing into his back trail.

We found out he used to run wet cattle acrost the Rio and that he worked with Bull Orson before things got too hot for him in Texas. He got wind of what we was finding out and we sure are setting on a box of gunpowder right now. Things are coming mighty fast to a head. Now you wonder, I guess, if I'm a going to ask you up here just to fight our troubles for us with Webb Gude. No, that ain't all of it, Joe.

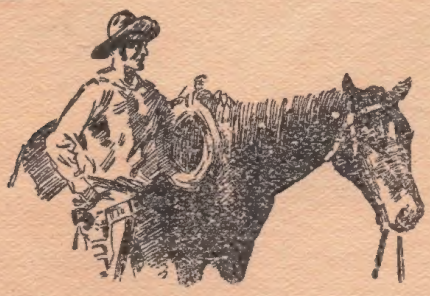
I guess you'd like a heap to find Bull Orson after he skipt out of the hot corner he was in down there. Of course, you can go tell that hard-boiled ex-captain of yours if you want to and let him send word to New Mexico lawmen to grab Orson, but I don't think you'll want to do

that. If they done it that way, Webb Gude would laugh at 'em and just pass on the word to Orson so's he could slip the rope again. Come on up, Joe, and let's talk it over, but come in careful, so's they don't know you're lighting on Plentiful Valley ground.

Your loving buddy,
Tom.

Joe Raglin folded the letter slowly and put it back into his vest pocket while his squinted blue eyes, turned toward the sun in the west, studied the vast picture of green below him. He sought out the cluster of houses and some larger business buildings far down there beside the river. That must be Angelita, for no other grouping of human habitations within sight was large enough to be called a town. Joe rubbed a streak of alkali from the glossy black shoulder of his horse, Midnight, and spoke to the animal.

"Well, pardner, it's near two hours easy going for you to Angelita if we're to slope in after dark. Let's slide on down to supper."



He tightened the strings on his saddle roll, then swung with easy gracefulness into the saddle. He was long-bodied and muscular, with the thin waist and supple movements of a young man who has learned how to value and conserve good health and physical endowments. A three days' growth of beard showed dark brown against the tan of his cheeks and chin. His thin lips, rather small, straight nose and high forehead gave him the stamp of a man who is sensitive, nervously alert and more intellectual than the average.

His regular rangeland attire included a blue steeled, black bone-handled .38 Colt on an S. & W. style carried in a brown leather holster at right hip, the tip tied to his leg. It was one of the newer double-action guns, with a fine adjustment which made it faster and more deadly accurate in the hands of one familiar with it than the old single-action forty-fives. It had the additional advantage of a safety catch that permitted a full load of six cartridges, a spring drop-out cylinder and automatic ejector which made full reloading a matter of short seconds.

There was only a faint red glow over the blue, pine-clad mountains in the west when Joe Raglin rode inconspicuously down the main street of Angelita. It was already too dark for anybody on the sidewalks to recognise a rider in the middle of the street. He let his black horse walk leisurely through the full length of the business section, seeking a livery stable without attracting notice by questioning people along the way.

Joe had been in a hundred towns just like Angelita. There was a small, two-storeyed frame hotel, two restaurants, three saloons, all well lighted, and a couple of general merchandise stores in which lights still shone, but with less ostentatious display than in the other places. "Buck Fain's Saloon and Amusement Palace" was the most ambitious looking and best lighted of the three saloons. A considerable supply of customers seemed to be already in this latter establishment as Joe rode past.

Not until he was well beyond the little lamp-lighted barber shop west of Buck Fain's did he discern the darkened front of a livery stable. The big front door was open, the interior very dark. He wondered if it was in use, then smelled the odours of recent occupancy as he came close. He dismounted before he saw the shuffling figure of the stableman coming out of the darkness.

"Hi, Mister," the caretaker greeted in a tremulous, old man's voice. "Puttin' up fer the night?"

"Yes, sir," Joe admitted, "that is, if you have room and board for Midnight here. Reckon I could get a room at that hotel back yonder a ways?"

"Sure, sure, young feller. That's what Webb Gude took over the Valley House fer, to take in travellers and put up home folks that wanta stay in town over night. Stranger here, or mayn't I be so inquisitive?"

"Stranger, yes, but I hope not for long. I'd sure like to stay permanent in such a fine country. Any riding jobs going begging in this section?"

Joe Raglin did not intend to ask directly for his brother, Tom, or let it be known why he had come. By indirect questions he would find Tom Raglin and get the lay of things. Without seeming to seek him, he wanted to locate Bull Orson. Bull would know him, of course, once they met, but Webb Gude would not. He watched the old stableman's nearly invisible face in the darkness.

"Things is sort've in a flux 'round here now," the old man replied hesitatingly. "I hear tell that Webb Gude is pickin' up some new men, but don't tell 'im I sent you to 'im."

"I thought he was your city marshal here. Is he ranching, too?"

"Now, I sure orta knowed I was openin' the door when I went a-askin' you a question," the old fellow complained. "It's sorta good policy 'round here not to ask questions about Webb Gude. Now git me right—Webb's a fine feller, but he jest don't like people to talk none about his business. You might go ask him. He's most likely at the city jail down 'crost the street there, or in Buck Fain's, or in his office at the hotel."

"All right, Pop," Joe laughingly agreed. "If he's not in one of them places, I'd better not ask where he is, eh?"

"Hunh?" the stableman grunted, then ignored the question and went on, "I'll take good care o' your saddler. One dollar a day for as long as you want, pay in advance."

He took the bridle reins from Joe and stood waiting.

"All right," Joe said in a pleased tone, "here's a dollar. I may have to ride on to-morrow. What's your name?"

"Becker, Sam Becker. My boy, Jetty, and me run this stable with a no-account Mex boy, Ricardo, helpin' Jetty day times. They orta be here to-morrow if you come fer your bronc in the daytime."

He started to lead Midnight into the dark interior as if he judged the conversation finished. Joe recognised the man's strange aversion to talk further and knew that there was a fear here about questions which might displease Webb Gude. The ex-Ranger conceived a strong desire to meet Webb Gude. He felt sure that in the course of his visit in Plentiful Valley he would have to meet the city marshal and if Tom Raglin's letter gave the true facts, the acquaintance with Gude held unpleasant possibilities.

HE walked back toward Buck Fain's. At the little one-chair barber shop he stopped in and got a shave. The barber was a nearly bald, thin-faced small man, with watery blue eyes and full, pale lips that stuck out while he worked as if he were going to kiss somebody at long range. After his second question had gone unanswered while he sat in the chair, lather on his face, Joe realised one good reason for the man's reticence when the little fellow stepped toward the door and squirted a mouthful of tobacco juice out upon the board sidewalk.

"I ain't been here long, Mister," the barber explained, "and, God bein' my helper, I ain't a-gonna be here no longer'n I can sell out and move on. I don't know nobody worth tellin' 'bout."

"You don't happen to've heard of a feller in here named Tom Raglin, have you?" Joe asked, feigning complete indifference.

The barber suddenly ceased his going over Joe's face with the razor for the last search of remaining beard stubs. He stood back a step and gaped, open-mouthed, at the curious eyes of the young man watching him. His pale face turned whiter. At last he waggled his nearly hairless head in a hopeless, bothered manner and came back to quickly finish the shaving task. He did not speak while he applied a smelly

tonic, wiped off briskly with a soiled towel, applied a stingy amount of face powder and indicated that he was done.

Mystified and definitely worried by the man's strange reaction to his inquiry about Tom, Joe paid him and left the shop without a word. He could not suppress his displeasure at such discourteous treatment. What possible reason could a man have for being afraid to speak of Tom Raglin, an honest, hard-working rancher who had driven a herd of Texas cows into this valley six years back and bought a small ranch? Joe was twenty-five years old; Tom was ten years older, a man with a yearning for peace and home comforts. He had written many glowing letters to Joe of the pleasant home he was building in this valley of no droughts, abundant grass. Only that last letter, the one in Joe's vest pocket now, had hinted at trouble in this little Garden of Eden. Joe went on toward a small restaurant between Buck Fain's saloon and the hotel, but his hunger was lessened by inexplicable premonitions.

It was already more than an hour after dark when Joe went in and took one of the high stool seats at the right-hand side of the horse-shoe lunch counter. The night life of Angelita had begun. Only two other customers were in the place. Joe chose his seat near the two customers, hoping they would start conversation with him and let him have an opening for a question or two.

There was no one behind the counter when Joe entered, but a moment after he sat down, a rather pretty ashen - haired blonde came through swinging doors from the rear, bearing a tray of food. She disposed of this food to the couple of men who occupied the second and third stools from Joe, between him and the rear. It gave young Raglin an opportunity to look the men over without giving possible offence by his scrutiny. They wore guns, but their mode of dress was a little too dandified, Joe thought, for them to be cowboys. Their faces were hard and their speech rough and uncouth, so much so that the girl left them gladly when she had deposited the last items of their supper.

She came to Joe Raglin, a frown lying like a small cloud on her face until she looked more closely at him. Then she opened large brown eyes more widely in surprised appraisal, smiling with unfeigned pleasure.

"Steak and potatoes, ham and eggs, or chili con carne," she informed him, still watching his face smilingly. "That's our supper list, Mister. What'll you have?"

He had removed his black Stetson and put it on the stool at his left. The girl's eyes followed his slender fingers admiringly as he ran them through his thick waves of dark hair, then she leaned her bare elbows on the counter in front of him and looked unblushingly into his eyes. She spoke only for his ears to hear.

"Mister, if I'd ever seen you before, I sure wouldn't've forgot it," she said with suppressed enthusiasm. "You must be a stranger to Plentiful Valley."

"I am, miss," he admitted, leaning toward her to speak as low as she had spoken. "I could enjoy my supper a heap more if you'd tell me a thing or two. Do you know if anything's happened to a rancher here in Plentiful Valley somewhere who's named Tom Raglin?"

INSTANT shock flashed in her eyes as she drew back from him with a quick gasp. Her glance turned in a lightning glimpse of the man nearest them on Joe's right, then she as quickly turned her face the other way toward the front door. Joe was aware then, without turning his head to see, that the man there on the second stool from him was looking at him and the girl. The conversation between these two men had ceased ominously.

"I guess you'd like the steak to-night,

Mister," the girl said, still gazing toward the front door, her face very white in the light of the reflector lamp hanging nearby. "It's fresh killed and sure is tender."

"Sounds good. Shove it out then," Joe ordered, definitely angered by this second display in Angelita of seeming repugnance at mention of his brother's name.

The girl went away with his order, ignoring the close stare given her by the two men down the counter as she passed them. Joe sat there drumming lightly on the counter with fingers of his right hand, aware that the two diners were studying him quietly. He hoped they would soon finish their eating and leave. Maybe the girl would talk and tell him things then. It was plain that she feared for them to overhear her talking to a stranger about Tom Raglin. He waited as patiently as he could for long minutes while the sizzle of frying steak sounded through the swinging doors from the kitchen. The girl did not come back until she came with his supper. Joe saw the two men surveying the platter as she brought it on to him.

"Annie's gone for you right off, stranger," the nearest man declared and laughed, but there was no real mirth in his laughter. "She hands you a lot bigger, juicier steak than she give us."

"It's the way they was cut," the girl quickly defended. "I take 'em as they come."

She had bright colour in her face now, and her hands seemed a little unsteady as she set the dishes before Joe. The ex-Ranger felt there was nothing he could say which would lighten the situation. He began eating while the girl went forward to the front bend of the counter and leaned on it there, looking out the front door, apparently ignoring all three of her customers.

Joe took his time eating, waiting for the two men to leave. No one else came in. He finished, but still the other two customers remained, although they had cleaned their plates long before. They smoked and talked, their words mostly too low for Joe to understand. The girl remained at the front with her back to the three customers. Raglin saw that his neighbours were determined to outstay him. To avoid an embarrassing situation for the girl, he arose to leave.

She took his money, gave him change from a wooden till under the counter. Her dark eyes glowed with some kind of mute, troubled appeal as she looked up into his face for a brief glance when she dropped the change into his hand.

"Is Buck Fain's a good place for me to loosen up and enjoy myself?" Joe asked her, making as if to go.

The cloudy expression in her brown eyes deepened as she replied:

"The only nice thing about Fain's," she declared, "is that June Dell sings in there. She's a friend of mine—my best friend. We room together at the Valley House."

CHAPTER II

Leaving the restaurant Joe Raglin went first to the Valley House and secured a room. A tight-mouthed man, who walked with a limp and was nearing sixty years of age, rented him the room he asked for on the second floor of the two-storey wooden structure. He was given a key and told where the room was to be found, near the back end of the top hall.

He went up to locate his room, but did not bring anything from his saddle roll to leave in it. He had learned by experience that it was bad policy to divide his light travelling possessions between his saddle and a hotel room when on a mission such as his present one. A hurried change in plans, a quick departure for other regions frequently made it necessary to keep things in one place. He inspected the room, made sure the window was fastened, then went out,

heading for Buck Fain's. It was no use to ask questions of the tight-lipped clerk.

Buck Fain's Saloon and Amusement Palace was built according to a pattern used in hundreds of towns and cities of the West. Being a little more ambitious than some, its gambling rooms were on a second floor, over the wide bar-room and dancing floor below.

At least fifty men were in the visible domain there on the ground floor when Joe Raglin walked slowly in through the wide-open front door. Many of them stood at the long bar covering nearly the full length of the east wall, but a majority sat at tables around the wide space in the centre of the room left clear for dancing. At most of the tables girls sat with the men, inducing them to buy drinks and drinking with them. Across the back end of the open floor a curtain hid the wide stage where Buck Fain evidently put on his main show.

On the west side of the big room a stairway led to the floor above. Beyond the rear end of the bar Joe could see another stairway, which he guessed must lead up to the private quarters of the stage entertainers. He went to the squared end of the bar and took his place beside the wall. Without looking at them too closely, he knew that most of the customers at the bar and many out across the room looked him over before he leaned his elbow on the bar.

How many of those men in that room were potential enemies and how many would be his friends was something he could not even guess at now. He feigned indifference. A bartender with curly black hair and very pale face and hands waited on him, bringing him a glass of beer.

When Joe lifted his glass to take his first sip of the beer, his eyes fell upon two men half-way down the long bar. They were the two with whom he had eaten in the restaurant. He surprised one of them looking steadily at him, but the fellow quickly averted his eyes, then put down his drink and went with obvious haste toward the back stairs. Joe quickly surveyed the crowd at the bar to see if Bull Orson or some of his men were there. He saw no one whom he recognised.

Before Joe had finished drinking his first glass of beer, the man who had gone so quickly up those rear stairs came back and took his place at the bar, facing his companion. It was obvious to the ex-Ranger that he must expect special attention from some direction very soon. He pulled his hat-brim lower over his eyes and waited, playing idly with his nearly empty glass, watching the room.

His expectancy was rewarded shortly when a tall man came down the west side stairs and picked his way between the tables toward the bar. As he came nearer, Joe saw a bright metal star displayed on the vest front of the man's blue serge suit. He was hatless. His hair was thin, a pale reddish colour, combed slick over his head. He wore a well-trained, curving sandy moustache. Without a glance at Joe Raglin, the law-starred tall man came to the head of the bar, between the young Texan and the corner where other men stood.

"Hello, Webb," the first man around the corner of the bar greeted. "Gonna have a drink with us?"

"Sure," and Joe could then see "City Marshal" lettered on the silver star. "I'll have a nip with you, Gage."

He ordered his drink and for the first time, with perfect simulation of casualness, he glanced at Joe Raglin.

"Hello, stranger," he greeted. "I hadn't noticed you. We like to welcome strangers in Angelita. Have a drink with us." He held out his hand and went on, "My name's Webb Gude, city marshal here, but don't hold that ag'in me."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Gude," Joe gave his hand for a firm handshake. "I'm Joe Cranston from 'crost the Estacado."

"Looking for a job riding?" Gude asked.

Joe was sure that the man whom he had seen go out and come back had carried Webb Gude a message. Perhaps the fellow had overheard his questioning of the waitress about Tom Raglin. With

that likelihood in mind, he decided to use a little strategy.

"I heard there was a Texan doing a little ranching somewhere in here and I sorta thought of hitting him for a job, being's I'm from Texas, but I'd sure take the first job a-coming my way."

"What's the name o' the Texan you heard was in here?"

"Feller this side of Roswell told me about him—said his name was Tom Raggin, or Raglin, something like that."

Joe lifted his glass and drank the last of his beer to hide his keen observance of Webb Gude's face. He saw a very nearly imperceptible change come over the man's expression. Gude looked at him with involuntary sharpness, then quickly turned to the bartender who was setting out new drinks.

"That's prob'ly Tom——"

He cut short his words and turned right about to face a young man who strode with fast, long steps through the door and came unhesitatingly toward the city marshal. There was red anger in the dark-haired young newcomer's face, a gleam in his dark eyes that promised trouble. He was plainly a working cowboy, but his faded Levi's and worn boots seemed unimportant in their dilapidation under the swinging, business-like .45 at his right hip. He stopped a few feet in front of Webb Gude and took his stance like a man expecting trouble.

"Where's Bull Orson, Marshal?" he demanded with clipped words.

"Faded out o' town when the ruckus was settled, Horn," Webb replied in an oily soothing tone. "Ain't no use in digging up buried bones, pardner. Your boss picked trouble with Orson and the shooting was fair and square. Bull won, hands down, and I had to let him go. That settles it, Horn."

"Settles it like hell!" the fiery young cowboy grated on the words. "You know damn' good and well it ain't settled, Webb Gude. My boss didn't even wear a gun when he come to town. You been lettin' too many killin's go wild and loose 'round here, Gude. You and your bunch may think you can run over us cowmen always, but we're gonna see about it, and damn' soon, too. That's fairer warnin' than your cut-throats give!"

He glared venomously at Joe Raglin, then swept the rest of the attentive, mostly scowling occupants of the big place with a look of withering contempt. It was a magnificent defiance. Joe felt a warming admiration for the fearless, angry cowboy in spite of the hatred the reckless youngster flung in his direction. It was plain that the challenging youth believed Joe to be one of Webb Gude's men.

Joe could read the actions of the killer men in advance of their first actual movement. He saw the twitching facial muscles of Webb Gude and the gleam of blood lust in his glaring eyes. In another moment the cowboy who had dared this den of gunmen would be cut down. Joe knew that he was with the cowboy in sympathy, that his brother would naturally be involved in this war between cowmen and the renegade elements of Plentiful Valley.

With a movement that was quick as a cat springing upon its prey, Joe Raglin leaped the few feet separating him from the blindly enraged cowboy. His right fist struck the youth on the side of his jaw, catching him wholly off-guard. Left hand grasped the gun at the cowboy's hip a second before the stabbing hand of the youth grasped for it.

Staggered backward by the blow and disarmed with such neat, lightning deftness, the cowboy was stunned further by a violent shove as Joe Raglin leaped in again and collided with him, forcing him out the door. He stumbled through the doorway and out upon the sidewalk. His gun clattered on the boards beyond him where Joe Raglin threw it. Someone outside spoke to the puncher in low, caution-

ing tones. He stooped and picked up his gun, then walked away, his steps accompanied by several other thumping pairs of boots.

Joe Raglin turned back to the bar, a smile of satisfaction on his face. He sensed immediately that Webb Gude was displeased. The marshal met his glance with a frown and harsh spoken words. Joe listened to the marshal's words, only half hearing them, for just beyond the line of men crowding the end of the bar a young woman stood and gazed at Joe with a smile that would have brought to life a barber's wooden Indian. Vaguely Joe remembered having seen her come from that stairway in the rear just as the noisy entrance of the cowboy had distracted his attention.

"That was quick, fine work, Cranston," Gude said, "but you hadn't ort've butted in. I have my own way o' settling such fool trouble hunters."

"I guessed that much, Gude," Joe replied, taking his eyes reluctantly from the beautiful girl long enough to look at the marshal, "but I had a pretty good idea you didn't see them fellers out in the dark there, ready to cut you down if you started for your gun."

That was a quick lie, for Joe had not known there were others outside until he heard them speak to the youth whom he had shoved out to them, but it was a lie so coolly and convincingly told that Gude was completely taken in.

"Hell, you don't say!" he exclaimed warmly and extended his hand. "Shake, pardner. Thanks! I guess you've got some mighty sharp eyes. I didn't see nobody out there and I sure looked for 'em just before you sprung on that young fool. Now let's have that drink. Yeah, let's have several, and all on me."

Joe's eyes slipped back to feast upon the girl who had smiled at him so sweetly. The smile was gone from her lovely face now as she turned to walk away. Something in the exchange of words between him and Webb Gude had offended her. Joe put his hand on Gude's arm as he spoke.

"Say, marshal," he said hurriedly, "if you'd give me a treat for something I ain't deserving treats for, help me to a chance for dancing with that girl there. Can you get them to start the dance music?"

"Haw, haw, haw!" one of the nearest of the men along the bar laughed, raucously. "Hey, June, yuh hear that? He thinks yuh're a dance girl! He wants a dance with yuh!"

All in the same flashing second, Joe Raglin saw the scowl of displeased reaction on Webb Gude's white face, heard the half drunken talk of the barfly and saw the girl turn to look at him with a puzzling look of reproach or pity in her dark eyes. She was so fresh and wholesome in her splendid young beauty that Joe felt instantly very contrite, as if he had insulted royalty by his impudence.

"That's June Dell, the singer," Gude told Joe. "She's no dance girl. I'd advise you not to——"

He cut off, looking around at the girl in surprise as she turned back toward him and Joe Raglin and spoke.

"I'm no dance girl, Mr. Gude, and you're quite right," she said, smiling from Marshal Gude to Joe Raglin, "but I do like to dance with a gentleman and a hero. This gentleman probably saved your life and many others by his quick thinking and acting. Will you introduce us, Mr. Marshal?"

Marshal Gude's sallow cheeks turned red. He seemed ready to burst with some strangely brewed emotion, but he controlled himself enough to speak.

"You know it ain't good business for you to dance here, June," he spluttered. "Go on back to your dressing-room and get ready to sing. The band boys'll be ready to play in a jiffy."

"They'll play right now if I want them to, Webb Gude," she replied imperiously. "They'll play dance music for me and this gentleman. You may be running this place while Buck is away, but you're not giving me orders. I have time for one dance before I sing. Do you wish to dance with me, Mister?"

She again favoured Joe Raglin with that bewitching, magnetic smile. Joe saw that her eyes were not black, but a dark violet blue. Her jet black, glossy crown of hair contrasted miraculously with her milky white complexion and the pale blue dress on her dainty shapely form.

"I'd sure admire a whole lot to dance with you, Miss June," Joe answered quickly, catching at this opportunity.

He stepped to her and offered her his left arm, guiding her out toward the squared space left for dancing in the middle of the big room. There were audible gasps of astonishment from many men and from some of the girls as they walked past the tables. June Dell called back over her shoulder to Webb Gude as she left him.

"Tell them to start a waltz, Mr. Marshal," she ordered.

With some slight misgivings, Joe Raglin saw Gude start toward the back end of the bar, a black frown on his face. The situation was not helped any, Joe thought, by the rough and rude bantering some of the men along the bar handed out to Gude as he went past them.

There was a hasty gathering of four men in a roped-off orchestra pit just below the stage. Musical instruments began emitting some tentative notes as the players tuned up. There was much shuffling of feet when many couples arose to enter the dance. Everyone seemed glad to dance on the same floor with June Dell.

Joe and his partner stood at the edge of the dance floor, waiting for the musicians. June Dell's head came even with his shoulder. She looked up into his eyes, smiling. There was entrancing magic in that smile and in those long, curving, black eyelashes that made her look sad and pensive, even when she smiled.

"You haven't told me your name," she reminded him. "You seem to know mine."

"Yes, I met your room mate at the restaurant to-night," he told her. "She told me about you, but I didn't know at first when I saw you 'while ago that you were June Dell."

He was hesitant about giving her a false name and was not yet ready to trust her with his real name. He looked around at the musicians, pretending to forget her question about who he was. The players struck up a lilting waltz. Joe swung his partner out into the dance. Her small warm hand in his sent thrills coursing through his body; her willowy, graceful form floated about him like a wispy feather.

"It was wonderful," she said, hovering close to his shoulder, "the way you handled Barry Horn. I don't believe you told Webb Gude the truth. You were saving Barry Horn's life, not Gude's."

"But when I told the marshal why I did it—to save his life—you believed me then for a moment," he accused.

"How did you know that?" she demanded quickly, looking her surprise.

"I saw the shrivelling look you gave me then. Why have you changed your mind?"

"Because I know you better. I think I know you very well. I don't believe you are one of these professional killers, running with Gude and Bull Orson. I want to ask a favour of you."

HE was still unwilling to trust her with full confidences, yet he felt instinctively that she was not a part of the regular dance-hall, honky-tonk riff-raff. He groped for words, and then evaded.

He said, "I'm looking for a job. Maybe you have a job for me."

She seemed disappointed. Her long lashes drooped.

"If you can do what I have in mind," she said hesitantly, "I can promise that you will be paid very well—if you live. It would be very dangerous."

"What is it? I will do anything short

of cold-blooded murder for you," he said sincerely.

She rewarded him with another of her magic smiles. She said nothing, but she clasped his hand more tightly.

"I don't know why I'm telling you this," she said, "but you must believe me. I'm not singing here just to make my living. I came out west looking for an old friend of my mother's. I heard that he was an outlaw somewhere in this country, but he is not by nature a robber and killer. He is just embittered with life and he drifted into this bandit life by some unfortunate accident. I came here to work for Buck Fain because I heard that Ace Dudley, the man I must find, comes here once in a while. Buck Fain promised to help find him for me. Now Buck Fain has disappeared, leaving Webb Gude in complete charge of this place. I'm suspicious of Webb Gude. I think he and Bull Orson have murdered Fain to get his business here. If you want a job, and you want to do something for me, find Buck Fain, or help me reach Ace Dudley wherever he hides out."

"All right, June Dell," he agreed, "we'll make a swap. I'll help you after I finish the job I'm on, maybe while I'm 'tending to that job. Will you swap me some information for my help?"

"But I thought you had no job," she said. "What information can I give that will help you?"

"I have asked two people in this town, one of them your room mate, if they knew Tom Raglin, a rancher in here. They all shut up like a cow with the lockjaw. What's so poison about Tom Raglin?"

"Webb Gude and Bull Orson let it be known that they would kill anyone who talked about Tom Raglin and what happened to him. What is Tom Raglin to you?"

An icy premonition swept Joe Raglin from head to the tips of his toes. Until now he had refused to admit the faint fears which had been knocking for admittance to his mind for the last hour.

"I told Webb Gude that my name was Joe Cranston," he told her as his feet slowed under him and he lost step, "but to you I'm Joe Raglin and I'm trusting my life to you by telling you that. Tom Raglin was my oldest brother. Has he been killed? Was he that boy, Horn's boss?"

She stopped with him in the centre of the floor. Other dancers bumped into them, then stared wonderingly at them. One man, rubbing Joe's elbow, left his partner abruptly and went away. June Dell's eyes were genuinely sad now, intensifying the drooping sweep of her long eyelashes.

"I'm terribly sorry, Joe Raglin," she said. "Your guess is right. They murdered Tom Raglin right over there at the end of the bar where you stood. Bull Orson shot him down last night in the meanest, most unprovoked murder ever committed. Then they placed a gun in his dead hand to make it look like he had drawn it to shoot Orson. They did it because Tom Raglin was organising the ranchers to clean out the wild bunch that operates under Gude and Bull Orson. Gude knew it was cold-blooded murder, but he let Orson go. That was final proof to me that Gude is crooked, that he and Orson have made away with Buck Fain to steal this place. What are you going to do now, Joe Raglin?"

He was standing before her, still and straight as a statue, feeling cold draughts as of winter winds sweeping over him, his eyes staring unseeingly out over her head as he gathered himself together from the terrific shock he had received. Suddenly he was jerked out of the stupor that had held him for a moment. A rough, commanding voice brought him rigid, every muscle and sensitive nerve in his body alert.

He looked around and saw Webb Gude elbowing his way between the dancers, saw and recognised the man coming beside Gude, the man who had a few moments before danced close beside him and June Dell when he told June his real name. Instantly he realised that the man had told Webb Gude who he really was, knew it before he understood Gude's words.

"Stop the dance!" Gude shouted, and the music hushed at once.

Gude stood five steps from Joe Raglin and June Dell, his whitish eyes glaring at the ex-Ranger with tense, deadly hatred. A big black six-shooter nestled in the marshal's hand, with hammer viciously curled like the head of a striking adder, while his finger toyed nervously with the trigger. To Raglin's eyes the weapon was foreshortened till there appeared only a black hole, surrounded by others, gleaming full of leaden death.

"Why did you lie to me about your name, Joe Raglin?" Gude demanded through gritting teeth. "Never mind. You can answer that in the hoosegow. You come here under an assumed name. Only them that the law wants go around under false names. I'm arresting you, Joe Raglin. Put up your hands!"

CHAPTER III

THERE was complete silence throughout the big dance hall and bar-room. Men and women held their breath, for all had heard Webb Gude's words and knew that this tall, quiet man beside June Dell was close kin of the man many of them had seen murdered in that very room. Another death was hovering close now, maybe many more deaths, for everyone saw that Joe Raglin did not raise his hands.

He glanced toward the big open front door without turning his head. It was twenty running steps to that door. A score of guns besides the one already in the hand of Webb Gude would be drawn to cut him down if he made a dash for the door. And if he surrendered meekly to this partner of Bull Orson, the man he had come many long miles to get, he would not live to see another sunrise, or talk to anyone but the enemies who craved his life blood.

He would never again look into the eyes of lovely June Dell, the girl who stood so tensed and brave beside him now. He suddenly realised, in the flashing quick thoughts that raced through his mind, that he very much wanted to see June Dell through many long years to come. He wanted to live to kill Bull Orson for the murder of his brother, but if he would do that he must kill Webb Gude now and run the gauntlet of certain bullets to follow.

"Lift 'em high and do it quick, Joe Raglin!" Webb Gude commanded and raised his gun threateningly. "Get away from him, June!"

"I won't!" June Dell cried. "He has done nothing wrong, Webb Gude! You have no right to arrest him!"

She tried to fling her arms up around Joe's neck to protect him with her own body. Her act, putting herself in such danger, brought him to a decision which he executed with lightning movements. No eye of the scores that watched that scene could possibly follow the flitting, dizzying action which snapped before it during the single second following June Dell's lifting arms.

Joe Raglin's left hand shoved her violently from him, casting her flat upon the floor. He leaped the other way. His right hand flicked upward from his hip as he sped through the air and came down to the floor, crouching. Webb Gude's six-gun roared in two quick bursts of flame, then a sharper, less thunderous shot screamed its snapping bark into the heavier notes of Gude's gun. It was the blue steel .38 talking from Joe Raglin's upcast hand.

All eyes were riveted on the tall form of the city marshal. There was amazement in the minds of all his friends. Why didn't he shoot again? Why didn't he finish the man who had dared draw when he already had his gun in hand for a sure kill? Yet he stood there as if hypnotised. His gun hand slowly fell down to his side, then the heavy gun dropped from his fingers and crashed upon the floor with a clattering metallic noise.

Men gasped their astonishment and women screamed their unbelief as Webb Gude's knees bent slowly under him. His head of thin, reddish hair fell forward

limply until his chin touched his chest as his whole body crumpled down to the floor in a shapeless mass.

The thundering medley of shouts and curses broke swiftly upon the close air of the big room, mixing with the screams of the dance girls. Men shouted questions, looking wildly about for the man who had done the incredible thing of killing Webb Gude before their fascinated eyes. Guns were drawn, questions shouted. A girl near the door screamed that the killer had slipped out the door, but her frantic cry was heard by only a few near-by.

Moving slowly at first, as if backing away for another shot, Joe Raglin had edged away toward the door, taking advantage of the short seconds while the crowd watched the dying marshal. Only one girl and her goggle-eyed dance partner stood in his way. They scarcely noticed him when he first brushed against them, their eyes being riveted on Webb Gude. Then the girl realised who he was and shrank from him. At that moment Gude fell to the floor and pandemonium broke loose. The girl screamed and pointed after Joe Raglin's disappearing form as he sped into the darkness of the street.

As Joe leaped out under the wooden canopy covering the sidewalk in front of the saloon and dance hall he was vaguely aware of the presence, here and there in the street, of many men. There was a murmur of voices. Horses were hitched to every hitch-pole on both sides of the street and some riders were then coming in from the east, past the hotel. As he went on out under the grey, dim light of the stars, going for the corner of the building, one of three figures standing ahead of him there on the board sidewalk, challenged him.

"Hold, feller! What you runnin' from?" the voice commanded.

Joe lifted his gun half-way to fire, determined to cut his way out of this ring of enemies and get to the stable and his horse. In his mind was a half-formed idea of riding blind out into the ranch country to look for his brother's place and the friends he expected to find there. The men ahead of him had fallen quickly aside as they challenged him. Two jumped behind horses at the hitch-rack on their right; the other jumped behind the building's corner. An instant before Joe pulled the trigger of his gun, aiming a shot at the man jumping behind the corner, he recognised a familiar note in that voice, then was sure it could be none other than the cowboy, Barry Horn.

He fell in behind the corner, bumping against the cowboy, but the shouts of those who came after him drew his attention back toward the door of the saloon. He peered around the corner of the building and saw men rushing out to the sidewalk. He must drive them back, keep them bottled up inside until he could get the situation in hand out here and line up with the friends of his brother.

Joe's .38 snapped out five spurts of flame as he emptied it at those piling out of the door. Men yelled in agony up there. Some fell; others stumbled over the fallen ones. Then there was a mad scramble to get back inside. While Joe flung out the cylinder of his gun and thumbed out the shells with the ejector, the sidewalk in front of the saloon became vacant again except for some motionless forms and one floundering, shouting wounded man.

The ex-Ranger was hastily shoving new cartridges into his gun's cylinder and for the first time had time to speak to the youth back of him who was again demanding who he was, what he was doing, what had happened. Men from across the street and up beyond the saloon, toward the hotel, were shouting questions at Horn. They wanted to know if it was he and his companions doing the shooting.

"I'm Joe Raglin, younker," he told the cowboy. "Reckon you're Horn, the cow-

boy I had to shove outa Buck Fain's tonight. I had to do it, pardner, or they'd a killed you, sure. I've just killed Webb Gude in there. They was coming hot after me is why I blasted them at the door yonder. How many men are there in town that'll help clean out this bunch?"

"Good jumpin' Jupiter!" the cowboy cried. "You Joe Raglin, our Boss's kid brother that he talked about so much? Hey, fellers!" he shouted loudly to all within hearing along the street, "here's Joe Raglin, the Texas Ranger, Tom Raglin's brother! He's jest killed Webb Gude and them skunks in there want to git him! At 'em, boys! Let's clean 'em out!"

"Hold it!" Joe Raglin shouted. "Don't shoot in there yet! There's a lotta girls in there. We can kill those lice when they come outside."

There was a burst of gunfire back of the dance hall and loud yells of defiance and mingled terror back there.

"They must be tryin' to run out back," Horn hurriedly told Joe. "We got men all around the place. They cain't git away out'n a run through our lead. Damn 'em, we'll clean Plentiful Valley of 'em this time!"

"Where's Bull Orson?" Joe asked Horn.

"Ain't that murdering skunk in there?" Horn almost shouted his question in his astonishment.

"No. I know the devil and he wasn't among them inside."

"Then he must be out to Buck Fain's ranch down the river. We'll go get 'im after we salivate these here skunks!"

"How many men you got here?" Joe insisted.

" 'Bout twenty-five," Horn informed.

"That's not half as many as them inside," Joe declared. "Must be a lot of them in there that don't run under Gude's and Orson's brand. Hadn't we better give 'em a chance to come out peaceable?"

"Try it and see how far you get," Horn snorted. "They don't hang out in there if they ain't crooks. Decent men 'round here been stayin' outa Fain's since Buck Fain disappeared a week ago."

"We've got to get them girls out," Joe persisted. "June Dell is in there and she's on our side. She told me about Tom's murder. Hey, you fellers inside! Will you let the women come out?"

The muffled thunder of a gunshot and splintering wood close to his face told Joe that someone inside had tried to pick him off by the sound of his voice. The walls were thin planking and bullets could easily penetrate them. Joe fired two quick shots through the planks in answer.

"They've muffed all the lights in there!" a man from across the street directly in front of the saloon shouted. "Let's set the skunk hole on fire and burn 'em out!"

A string of three quick shots from an upper window of the gambling rooms answered that cry. Shouts from the other side of the street told that the shots cut close to human targets. A scattered volley from many points up and down the street gave hot answer. Bullets spanked into the upper floor of the building, or glanced off and zoomed away into the night, singing weird songs.

THERE came a tumult of shouting from the far side of the saloon, over beside the hotel. Feminine voices were raised in loud appeal. There was so much rumble of shouts and curses inside the dance hall that Joe Raglin and young Horn could not make out what the excitement was on the other side.

"Sounds like the women are gittin' out," Horn said. "I sure didn't think them skunks would let 'em. It'd be more like 'em to hold the gals in there to protect their own hides."

A window snapped open back of the two young men, on the west side of the dance hall. Both turned and flattened themselves against the wall, searching for the opening window. It was too dark under the overhanging eaves of the building to see. A gun flashed from the wall of the house and in the following roar of its explosion, dirt scattered over Joe's boots, kicked up by the bullet.

Joe fired instantly at the spot where he had seen the flash of gun, then

immediately shoved Horn around the corner of the building on to the board sidewalk. Answering bullets smacked into the ground at his retreating heels.

A man came running across the street and fell in beside Joe and Horn.

"The wimmin was all herded out to the hotel from the other side," the fellow informed enthusiastically. "June Dell and one or two other spunky gals got guns and made them skunks in there let 'em go. They backed out through the dressin'-rooms from t'other side. Now what's to keep us from burnin' 'em out?"

"You sure June Dell is safe outa there?" Joe demanded, too glad to believe the good news.

"Sure's hell she is," the man assured. "She led the grand march, herself. One man tried to git out in wimmin's clothes that he'd grabbed from the dressin'-rooms, but we knocked 'im over the head and laid 'im out in the hotel front."

"All right. Let's pour lead in on 'em till they give up," Joe suggested. "Them walls are thin. They'll soon get tired dodging our lead in there."

"A little fire under a back corner o' the place would soon bring 'em pilin' out," Horn declared.

"If this is Buck Fain's property, we oughtn't to burn it," Joe cautioned. "From what June Dell told me, Buck Fain is all right. Gude and Orson are the ones that was doing the dirty work."

A rumble of many horses running came from far down the road west of the Becker livery stable. Joe and his two companions listened to the sounds for a moment as they came rapidly nearer.

"Sounds like a bunch o' the devils comin' in from toward Fain's ranch," Horn surmised. "I bet it's Bull Orson and his gang if he wasn't inside. It sure ain't none of our men."

The horsemen came galloping boldly up within sight now in the starlight. As they swept up opposite the three watchers, Joe counted seven of them. Evidently the men across the street and those at the windows inside the building held their fire, each side wondering if these were friends or enemies. The riders drew up in front of the saloon, but hesitated about dismounting, obviously puzzled by the darkened premises and the quiet.

"What's the matter here?" a booming voice yelled. "Webb Gude! Where are you?"

"That's Bull Orson!" Horn murmured excitedly to Joe Raglin, then shouted, "Let 'em have it, boys! It's Tom's killer, Bull Orson?"

A burst of gunfire that sounded like a thousand cannon crackers in a Fourth of July celebration going off split the night air. Joe and his companions added their bullets to the hail of lead pouring in upon the seven horsemen. The horses reared and leaped away, evidently urged by their riders. Dimly in the poor light of the stars, amid the wild medley of yells from men and the screams of terror and agony from some of the stricken horses, Joe saw four horsemen shoot past, returning to the west from whence they had recently come. One horse had gone down with his rider in the middle of the street right after whirling to run. Two of the horses ran half-heartedly and riderless after the escaping four.

"Come on, Horn!" Joe Raglin shouted. "You two fellers come with me and let's get Bull Orson if he's one of them getting away. Let the others keep peppering these lobos inside the saloon."

"All right, pardner," Horn agreed. "I'm right with you if you're after Bull Orson. Let's run for it acrost the road to the other fellers and tell 'em, then we'll burn ol' Bull's tail."

All three jumped away from the building and dashed for the opposite side. Shots spurted from the upper windows of the gambling hall as soon as the three runners got out into the street. Dust flew in jumpy spurts about them. A bullet burned a gash along Joe Raglin's jaw, another snatched at his boot leg. Just when they reached the opposite sidewalk and were about to fall in behind the corner of a store building there, young Horn grunted loudly and sprawled forward across the sidewalk boards.

JOE stooped and grabbed the youth by his shoulders and dragged him to safety, then fell down beside the wounded cowboy.

"You bad hurt, younker?" he asked, feeling of the youth's bare head. He had worn a hat when they started across the street.

Some men, three or four of them, slipped out from inside the store and came to Joe and the silent man who stood beside him over young Horn.

"A bullet cut his scalp," Joe spoke upward to the men, "but it just creased him. He's still got a pretty hard thumping heart. Two of you men take care of him, get him around to the hotel. Two of you might come with this feller and me to get after Bull Orson. He may've been one of them that run away. How 'bout it, fellers? I'm Joe Raglin, Tom's brother."

There was instant and numerous agreement with profuse offers of help to run down Bull Orson wherever the trail led to.

"That was Bull Orson leadin' 'em on the run-out," one of the men said. "I saw 'im plain as he run by. Let me be one to go after that devil, Joe Raglin. I knowed your brother, Tom, ever since he come in here."

"Come on, then. Maybe you men'll know where to find him. Let's go! Get your horses and meet me in front of Becker's livery stable quick as you can. My horse is there."

He rushed away down the street toward the livery stable, only one thought filling his mind. Bull Orson was getting away.

CHAPTER IV

AT the livery stable Joe found the big roller door closed and locked across the wide entrance. He called for the keeper. There was a slight noise of someone stirring inside the little office in the corner, left of the locked door. Joe went to the half-open window of the office.

The long, double-barrelled muzzle of a shotgun poked out at him and the querulous voice of old man Sam Becker challenged him.

"Better git goin' 'fore I cut loose, feller," the angry old stableman warned. "Yuh ain't gittin' no horses from this stable to run away on. Git!"

"Mr. Becker, I'm the man who left the big black saddler with you two-three hours back," Joe explained, stepping warily aside from the menacing gun-muzzles. "I only want my own horse."

"Oh, so 'tis the young stranger!" the old man exclaimed. "Him that ast 'bout Tom Raglin, ain't yuh?"

"Sure. I'm Joe Raglin, Tom's brother. Let me have my horse quick, Mr. Becker, I've got some fast riding to do."

Sam Becker's old stumbling feet hurried out of his office and the big stable door opened wide enough to admit a man.

"Come in, son," the old fellow invited. "Some thievin' skunks come a-runnin' here few minutes ago and tried to make me open up and give 'em horses. I knowed hell'd busted loose up town and that they was some o' them scallions o' Webb Gude's. I made 'em vamoose quick with my old calamity howler here."

They kept on talking after old man Becker had again locked the door and lighted a lantern with which to pick out Joe's horse and saddle him.

"Is them rancher boys bustin' up Webb Gude's owl-hoot bunch?" the old man asked.

"I guess they'll clean 'em up pretty soon," Joe informed, seizing his saddle and blankets to throw on his racer. "Gude is dead. Bull Orson and his bunch rode in a few minutes ago, caught some lead and run for it. Did you see 'em go past here?"

"I tuk 'em to be Bull and three o' his vultures. They was sure a-burnin' the road out south. Yuh goin' after Bull for murderin' your brother, eh?"

"You guessed it, pop. Where's he likely to head for?"

"Back to Buck Fain's ranch, fifteen mile down the river. I was skeered to tell yuh 'bout Tom Raglin when yuh ast me to-night. I didn't know who yuh was and——"

"That's all right, Mr. Becker."

There came shouts from outside and trampling of horses' feet, and men shouting Joe Raglin's name. Joe answered them and swung into the saddle.

"Open the door, Mr. Becker," he requested. "They're my friends—going with me after Bull Orson."

In a few minutes Joe Raglin and two companions were speeding out along a winding road which followed the general course of the river that wound down southward through the centre of the wide, grassy valley. One of the men introduced himself as they ran. He was Jetty Moore, a small rancher from over toward the western mountains, a friend of Tom Raglin's since the latter had come to Plentiful Valley. The other rider was Ben Holt, a cowboy on Tom Raglin's Bar-LN ranch in the upper valley.

While they rode, three abreast, Moore and Holt told Joe of how the trouble in Plentiful Valley had suddenly grown to unbearable proportions immediately after Bull Orson and his gang had blown in from Texas. Tom Raglin had at last gathered the ranchers and their cowboys together and organised a vigilante group to use force, since Gude and his town crowd of illegal voters had won in a recent election.

On the previous night Tom had ridden into town with four other ranchers to attend to some business. They had come unarmed in order to avoid the possibility of trouble. Webb Gude had induced Tom Raglin, by some pretext which probably would never be known, to enter Buck Fain's saloon. There, with none of his friends to witness it, he had been murdered. His body had been taken back to his ranch and buried that morning, then the cowmen had gathered their forces and let Barry Horn, the young and very capable foreman on the Bar-LN, lead them for the clean-up.

"After we ketch ol' Bull and finish with 'im," Ben Holt said to Joe Raglin, "you'll probably come and take over the Bar-LN and be our boss, won't you, Mr. Raglin?"

Joe rode on for some distance through the night before answering. He wondered what he would do if he lived through to the happy day when all accounts were settled and he could choose his future. He had been guided until to-day with a high resolve to take Bull Orson and his gang back to Texas as his prisoners, or take his former Ranger captain proof that he had made a quicker, less expensive settlement of the outlaw's career. But a lovely pair of dark blue eyes and long, drooping eyelashes had suddenly wrought havoc with his former resolve.

"Maybe," he told Ben Holt. "Tom not being married and having no family to leave his ranch with, I guess I'd be the one elected to look after his ranch, since my two other brothers have ranches of their own to worry with down on the Rio. It all depends on what comes outa this hopper we're poking into."

"Sure, I know that, but we'll sure be proud to work on for you. The boys was all a-wonderin' jest this mornin' if you'd come and run things."

BUT Ben Holt didn't know that Joe Raglin was thinking of June Dell and wondering if she would be willing to share a home with him in Plentiful Valley. Like himself, June Dell was in this country on a serious mission. Why she had to find Ace Dudley, the outlaw, and what she would do after finding him —if she ever did—was an unknown quantity to the grim ex-Ranger, but until his own deadly undertaking was finished he would have no right even to dare hope that June Dell would share a ranch home in Plentiful Valley with him. He now had double and treble reason to clean the world of Bull Orson. No longer was there any intention in his mind to try and take Bull Orson alive back to Texas.

Far away and quite unimportant now

was the matter of his record with his former Ranger company. Bull Orson had committed many crimes down on the Rio for which the State of Texas wanted him, dead or alive. He had overcome Joe Raglin by a clever ruse and with superior, overwhelming numbers, disarming and disgracing him. For that Joe had wished to take him back to pay society for his crimes. Now it was far different. Bull Orson owed him a debt immensely greater than he owed the State of Texas. When that debt was collected, Joe would no longer wish to continue his dangerous, exciting life in the Rangers.

They never thought to stop and examine the road to make sure that Bull Orson and his three companions had ridden back this way. Moore and Holt were so certain that Bull Orson would make for Fain's ranch before continuing his flight that there was common agreement to try and overtake the outlaws at the ranch before they had time to gather what booty and supplies they had there and go on.

"Buck Fain let Webb Gude persuade him to take Bull Orson and his men on at his ranch when they come in here," Jetty Moore explained. "Buck Fain was a easy-goin', good feller. He wasn't a cowman, but had loaned money to old man Sheppard on this ranch down-river and finally had to take it over. I hear that Gude made him believe Bull Orson and his men would take charge of it and make him big money. Maybe they meant to use it for rustlin' headquarters, out'n tellin' Buck about it. Anyhow, Buck faded out a week or so ago, leavin' Gude one o' them power attorney papers to run his business for him."

"Have you fellers ever heard of a man in these parts by the name of Ace Dudley?" Joe asked his loping companions.

"Sure," Ben Holt said. "I heard a lotta stories 'bout him. He's got a hide-out somewhere that no sheriffs and posses ever been able to smoke out. They say he's a woman-hater—won't have nothin' to do with honky-tonk gals, or nothin'."

"He's got lotsa friends 'mongst the Mexies and white folks, too," Jetty Moore explained further. "They call him 'Robin Hood' after some old time robber that used to rob the rich and give to the poor devils, 'cause Ace sorta does like that Robin Hood feller."

"Do you have any idea where he might show up some time?" Joe asked.

"Hell, if them that know Ace Dudley knowed that," Jetty Moore replied with feeling, "they wouldn't tell, and if them that don't know him knowed it, they'd hot-foot to the first sheriff and bleat it to the law."

"I get you, pardner," Joe agreed, "but I'm not riding for the law now, not any more. I have a very good and friendly reason to want to find Ace Dudley after I'm done with Bull Orson."

"That so?" Jetty Moore asked, riding closer to Joe's stirrup until their boots almost touched. "I've heard that the law ain't yet got into Silverlode, that new mining town a hundred miles north-west o' here. It's in the mountains. Ace Dudley is been known to drop into Ted Morrissey's swanky place there. If a feller went there and waited long enough, he'd likely run into Ace Dudley if he knowed how to look for him. He's old and he's bald-headed and he's got a sorta sad and sorrowful look in his eyes."

"How old?" Joe asked.

" 'Bout fifty or sixty. Hard to tell."

"Thanks, Jetty. Maybe I'll be looking for Ace Dudley soon, if we have luck on this trail. How much longer before we come to Fain's ranch?"

"Must be another half-hour's ride if we keep up this gallop," Moore explained. "But we orta slow down soon. They might hear us comin'."

"But if we don't hit 'em quick, they might have time to skip 'fore we git there," Ben Holt put in from the other side of Joe.

"They'd most likely hit for the mountains over west," Jetty Moore suggested. "Let's circle around north o' the ranch and come at it slower from the other side."

"That's a good idea," Joe Raglin agreed. "Let's do it."

The first faint red of dawn was painting the eastern horizon when the three riders stopped a quarter of a mile west of Buck Fain's ranch house and left their horses under the screening protection of a coulee. From there the three men approached the main house from the rear, with the pole corrals and a partly depleted stack of hay to cover their advance.

A half-dozen horses were visible in the small corral. As they came nearer and could see the horses clearly, Joe Raglin whispered to his companions that the animals had not been ridden very recently. He pointed to the lack of saddle markings.

"Gosh, that looks bad!" Ben Holt moaned. "I bet they ain't comin' here a-tall."

"Let's get on where we can see out front," Joe proposed. "If they're in a big hurry to move on, thinking the jig's up for 'em in here, they'd leave their broncs hitched and ready to jump on out front."

Ben Holt trotted across to the other side of the hay-stack and peeped around it, surveying the front of the house. He came back, gloomy of face.

"They ain't a sign o' no horses at the hitch-rack out front, or along the front fence," he informed. "Bull and his three men sure haven't come here yet, or they've come and skedaddled mighty quick."

"They haven't come and gone," Joe said. "If they had, these horses wouldn't have been left in the corral. They would have caught them out for fresh mounts and left their fagged broncs loose, or led them away with 'em. They'd a never left fresh horses corralled here for anybody chasing them to grab off and use."

Jetty Moore had crawled forward to the front of the hay-stack and was studying the house. Joe and Ben saw him jerk backwards suddenly, then arise and come hurriedly toward them. While he came, they heard a door bang shut at the house.

"Sh-h-h!" Moore hissed warning. "A feller's comin' out toward the corral from the kitchen door. He's one o' Bull Orson's men that I've seen in town."

"I'll watch from the other side," Ben Holt volunteered and ran on the carpet of old, mouldy hay, to the far end of the hay-pile.

He knelt down there and peeped around the corner of the hay-stack, looking toward the front of the corral and the house. He waved a signal back of him without looking around, showing that he saw something. He remained still for a few seconds, then quickly flopped backwards. In the same instant a man's voice yelled out excitedly over at the front of the corral.

"Who's that behind the hay-stack?" the fellow shouted. "Hey, Lucky!"

The listening men heard fast running steps going toward the house, then boots pounded on wooden steps and a door slammed again. Excited voices, muffled by the house and the distance, sounded in the ears of the three men behind the hay-stack. Ben Holt came rather shamefacedly back to his companions.

"The sharp-eyed coyote seen me," he said dejectedly. "Durn it, I had jest the skin o' my eyes hangin' out, and he seen me. Now what'll we do?"

"Charge in on 'em before they can organise," Joe declared, rising. "Come on. He called to somebody named 'Lucky.' Sounds like there'd be just two of 'em here. I'll bust in through the back. You fellers take the front. Let's coop 'em!"

He ran forward without waiting for their assent. The two Plentiful Valley men had to follow his lead whether they liked it or not. Joe had no time to argue. He was sure that Bull Orson had not come here yet, but would surely be in shortly. Joe decided on the instant that it would be much better to be inside the house and in quiet control of the place when Bull Orson showed up.

As he ran out from behind the hay-stack and streaked across the yard, he saw

that the small back porch of the house was screened. He ran in a zigzag course for the porch door. A gun blazed within the darkness of the porch, where the kitchen door would likely be. The wire screen west of the porch door puffed out as the bullet smashed through it, but the missile did not come close enough to Joe to be heard.

The Texan snapped a shot quickly at the dull flash he had seen through the screen and threw himself down beside the porch steps. He heard the patter of his companions' feet as they raced around toward the front of the house.

"Get 'em from the front, boys!" he yelled. "I'll keep 'em busy from back here!" He wanted to rattle the men inside, scare them.

Another shot roared up there in the porch and Joe Raglin's hat bounced off his head. He ducked lower beside the steps and lifted his gun over the top step, firing blindly toward the inside kitchen door. He heard stumbling feet bumping on the floor inside the kitchen and peered hastily between a crack under the screen. There was no one visible in the doorway to the kitchen. He leaped up the steps, jerked the screen door open and bounded across to the inside door.

A gun poked around the door-facing and blazed away. The ex-Ranger had been looking for that. He dodged and fired at the hand holding the flaming gun, but his bullet only tore splinters from the door-facing; the hand with the gun had disappeared. A sudden burst of running feet inside the still darkened kithcen told Joe that his antagonists, or at least one of them, had run deeper into the house.

He jumped through the kitchen door, crouching and weaving, looking hastily all about the place which was cluttered with a stove, tables, boxes and other hiding obstructions. He saw no one. A cry of excitement came from the front, followed immediately by a burst of several mingled shots from more than one gun. Joe ran through the open door leading out into the front of the house and found himself in a very dark, narrow hallway.

There was more light toward the front. He saw a man running with frantic haste up a stairway and saw the flash of his gun as he fired downward just before he disappeared toward the head of the stairs. A loud cry of pain came from the large front room into which Joe sped, then the cry broke off into an agonised moan. He saw Jetty Moore, gun in right hand, stooping over the crumpled form of Ben Holt.

"Is he bad hurt?" Joe asked, horrified as he ran across to his companions. He backed up to Jetty Moore while he looked for the killers.

"He's dead already," Jetty Moore said, biting out the words. "Them two devils run upstairs. Let's stick a match to this old house and burn 'em out! Buck Fain wouldn't lose much."

CHAPTER V

THIS second suggestion within a few hours to burn down the property of someone else not responsible for the criminals was irksome to Joe Raglin. He had been trained to a different code. He remembered June Dell's suspicion that Bull Orson and Webb Gude had been instrumental in the unexplained absence of Buck Fain. The thought flashed in his mind now that perhaps Buck Fain was a prisoner in this very house, that these two men had been left as his guards.

"No," he vetoed Jetty Moore's suggestion. "They might have somebody locked up in the house somewhere. Let's burn 'em out with hot lead. Are you game to go up after them, Moore?"

"I'll go with you to hell and back after 'em, Raglin!" Moore promised hotly. "I knowed this kid all his life and——"

He shut off as loud, angry voices broke forth in furious altercation above the stairs. The muffling walls and closed doors between them and the speakers made the words unintelligible, but there was both ferocity of feeling and piteous pleading in the tones of those voices.

"Come on!" Joe Raglin said and rushed toward the stairs.

The light of morning was much more distinct now. They could see the top of the stairs and parts of two room doors up there. The sounds of the voices came from the rear room. Joe ran lightly up the flight of steps, making little noise. Moore followed in like manner. Stopping at the head of the stairs, Joe turned and whispered to Moore.

"Are you sure that both of those coyotes come up here?" he asked.

"I seen them with my own eyes, one come a little ahead o' the other'n," Moore declared emphatically. "That's them fightin' over somethin' in there."

Raglin stepped across to the door, behind which a man was heard plainly pleading for his life. Jetty Moore was right at Raglin's heels.

"Good gosh!" he murmured, laying a hand on Joe's shoulder, "that's sure's hell Buck Fain's voice doin' that hollerin'. They must be gonna kill 'im."

Joe stepped to one side of the door and reached out a boot-toe for a violent kick on the panel.

"Hey, you, in there!" he yelled. "You Bull Orson men! You better give up peaceable. Webb Gude and Bull Orson are dead in town. The jig's up for you fellers. Give up and come out peaceable."

"You go plumb to hell!" came the angry retort. "Bull Orson ain't dead and you cain't fool us. We'll get the other two o' you like we done your pal downstairs. You better get goin' 'fore Bull shows up. He'll be here any minute."

"Don't let 'em bluff you out there!" a quailing voice shouted, then was shut off as it tried to speak further, a fist evidently smashed on the speaker's mouth.

"That's Buck Fain!" Jetty Moore exclaimed.

"All right, all right!" Buck Fain's tremulous voice cried again. "I'll tell you where my money is hid. It's down under the kitchen floor, underneath the stove!"

Again a fist seemed to have smashed into Fain's mouth, for his last word came short and choking.

"They been trying to make him tell where his money was hid," Joe said, "and now he yells it so we could hear. We gotta hurry. They'll kill 'im now. You got a .45, Jetty. Blow that door lock off. Quick!"

Jetty Moore didn't need any extra seconds to comprehend. Joe's lighter .38 would not do as certain damage to the old-fashioned door lock as his big .45. He snatched up his heavy gun and stood to one side, aimed at the centre of the lock and fired.

There was a wild, piteous shout within the room, then a shot roared in there. The door had shaken under the impact of Moore's bullet, but did not open. He fired again and amidst a screech of lead on steel, the door flew open.

Joe Raglin was ready. He crouched low and looked quickly around inside the room, his .38 ready in his right hand. He immediately lifted the gun and fired, then fired again and jumped into the room. Jetty Moore leaped in after him.

A man was climbing out on the kitchen roof from a window of the room. That man was half-way out, one leg still dangling inside the room. He tried to lift a gun to shoot at Joe Raglin, but the ex-Ranger fired a third shot and the man wavered a moment, then fell back into the room as the two fighters ran across toward him.

Two dead men lay on the floor, one of them with his wrists and ankles tied by ropes. Joe Raglin did not have to wait for Jetty Moore's identification to know that the bound man was Buck Fain, murdered helplessly after he had shouted the location of his cache of money. The other dead man was the Orson henchman whom Joe had brought down with his first shot as he ran for the window with his companion.

RAGLIN and Moore stood for a little while in silence, viewing the death scene. Neither man cared for the sight of dead men. Jetty Moore broke the silence.

"Now what'll we do, Raglin?" he asked. "You reckon Bull Orson will come on here? He's had plenty of time to get here."

"If he doesn't come in here to-day," Joe said, "we'll just have to go back and try to pick up his trail out of Angelita. I don't think he's coming, or he would be here by now, but we can't take a chance. If he does come in late, we have a perfect set-up for taking him by laying low here till we have him covered."

"What'll we do with the dead?" Jetty asked.

"Leave 'em be till late in the afternoon, then if Orson hasn't come up, we'll leave these two Orson lobos for somebody to bury later. We'll pack Fain and that poor kid downstairs into town on the horses."

"Let's go down and see if we can find Fain's cache of money," Jetty Moore proposed. "If we leave it here, something might happen to it, or the house might be burned down on it."

"All right," Joe agreed. "We can take it in and leave it in safe hands for his heirs. He mst have folks somewhere. Was he married?"

"No, not that I know of. He was always a sort of shut-mouth feller, but a straight shooter. All us ranchers and cowboys liked him and patronised his place till Webb Gude and Bull Orson got their lariat on him."

They went downstairs and worked as quietly as they could, ripping out short boards from the floor under the stove, where they had been clearly placed since the rest of the floor was laid. The two workers kept a constant, vigilant look-out for men that might come up to the house, working in short spells at their task.

When the boards were finally ripped out and removed, a strong oak box, about two feet square, was taken from a crude framework built in under the floor. There was a rope tied around the box, but otherwise it was not fastened. It was heavy, but they lifted it out easily. Joe opened it on the kitchen table. Both men looked curiously at the contents.

There were about a hundred silver dollars, twice that many ten and twenty-dollar gold coins and between twenty and thirty thousand dollars in neatly wrapped packages of bank notes. The two young men did not molest the money to count it exactly, for they soon saw a paper on which they found Buck Fain's simple will. The paper read:

> To whom it may concern: If this comes into the hands of others, it will be after my death and it will be with a larger part of my ready cash. All my money and property has been accumulated by honest dealings. I have never run a crooked game, or sold bad liquor. I have a brother in this country somewhere known by the name of "Ace" Dudley. That is not his real name, nor is Buck Fain the name with which I was christened. If Ace will give up the dark trails he is following and go back to the ways of honest men, I want him to have all I leave behind me and may God cure the great bitterness that has ruined his life. This is my last will and testament.
>
> (Signed),
>
> Buck Fain.

"That's short and sweet," Joe Raglin mused. "Now I guess when I find Ace Dudley, I'll have something else to tell him."

CHAPTER VI

ONE of the Bull Orson followers who had been shot out of his saddle in front of Buck Fain's saloon was carried along with many other wounded and dying men to the emergency hospital set up in the Valley House. The leaderless friends of Webb Gude and Bull Orson in the saloon had finally sur-

rendered after many of their number were dead or wounded.

Plentiful Valley, being a part of a very large county, was fifty miles from the county seat and sheriff. The aroused ranchers bound their prisoners and prepared to haul them off to the sheriff to let the law deal with them, or turn them loose as the sheriff saw fit. At least Plentiful Valley would be rid of them.

June Dell, Daisy Mullens, her roommate, and several other women were enrolled as impromptu nurses by the one physician of the valley. It fell to June Dell's lot to care for the last wants of a dying Orson gunman after the doctor had done all he could for him. She had given the fellow no more attention than to others under her care until she heard him, in great agony of his wounds, cursing Bull Orson. Her ears were instantly attentive then.

All through the night June Dell had struggled with the fear that Joe Raglin had taken up the trail of Bull Orson alone and would be killed by that wily, unprincipled outlaw. She had looked anxiously for Joe among the wounded, felt relieved at not finding him, then, when she did not find the men who had seen Joe and his two companions leave town to learn the truth from them, she was sure that Joe Raglin was doggedly on the trail of Bull Orson and his surviving gunmen. She was not the kind to sit idly and wring her hands while the man, with whom she had fallen suddenly and madly in love, was in mortal danger. She wanted to help him, or at least share his dangers. Thus she gave quick ear to the groaning man who cursed Bull Orson.

"What have you got against Bull Orson?" she asked the suffering man, stooping anxiously above him.

"He run out an' left me—th' dirty swine—he an' the other yaller cusses with 'im," the man complained bitterly. "I hope he burns in hell fer it!"

"Where will Orson go?" June asked quietly, trying not to show the flaming anxiety she felt.

"Why d'you wanta know?" the patient demanded sullenly. "He's crazy 'bout you, but you sure don't want 'im."

"I want to know where he is—where I can find him," she insisted. "Won't you please tell me?"

"Only if you'll promise to kill the yaller skunk fer me, then I'll tell you," he groaned, racked with pain from his wound.

"I can't promise to kill Bull Orson," she replied. "Women don't kill, but I know someone who is trying to find him and kill him. I must find him. I have a very, very great reason to know. Where is he going to be?"

"You sure are a purty gal, an' mighty sweet to me that don't desarve it," the fellow mumbled weakly and gasped for breath. "I sure would like to pay 'im back fer runnin' off thataway from a pardner what'd been knocked from his saddle. Bull is going to Ace Dudley's hangout beyond Midnight Chasm."

June Dell caught her breath in a sudden little gasp. The wounded man looked curiously at her and hesitated in his recital.

"Yes, yes," June said, stooping closer to the man, "please go on—about that midnight chasm."

"It's a secret place," he continued, " 'bout twenty mile 'bove Silverlode, the new mining town over west. He's gonna bushwhack Ace Dudley later an' take over Ace's place there, an' go robbin' mines an' payrolls an' sech. They'll git Ace down to Silverlode sometime an' spill a lotta lead into him from the dark, then Bull will boss things in that purty mount'n hole. You go tell Ace Dudley that. He'll fix ol' yaller Bull. You gonna go out there?"

"How do I get there?" she asked.

"You take the stage over to Sisto and from there take t'other stage over the mount'ns."

"Thank you," she said, her blue eyes dancing with lights in them that had not been there before. "You have done a good deed."

AN hour later June Dell was in her room packing and listening to the wailing of Daisy Mullens, her room-mate. The stage for the west would leave at nine o'clock and June Dell meant to be on it. She would reach Silverlode ahead of the outlaws and Joe Raglin if she could. Perhaps Ace Dudley could be reached and persuaded to take care of Bull Orson before Joe Raglin risked his life against so ruthless a killer.

"I've never seen you act so crazy before this, June Dell," Daisy Mullens wept, sagging there on the edge of the bed. She had ceased the hopeless argument against June's going.

"I've never been in love before, Daisy," June Dell replied. "Have you ever been in love, Daisy?"

"Oh, lotsa times, but they're never worth what you're doing for this Joe Raglin."

"Then you never loved a man like Joe Raglin," June answered, stopping her hasty preparations to look at her friend with sparkling eyes. "You never felt Joe Raglin's arms holding you close, making you oh, so glad! If you had, Daisy, you'd know why I'll go to the ends of the earth for him."

The intensity of her feeling brought tears to add to the sparkle of her eyes. Daisy Mullens was awed.

"You sure must be in love, June Dell, and all so sudden," she said limply, "but I still don't see how you are so sure you'll find your great and wonderful man out there where you're going."

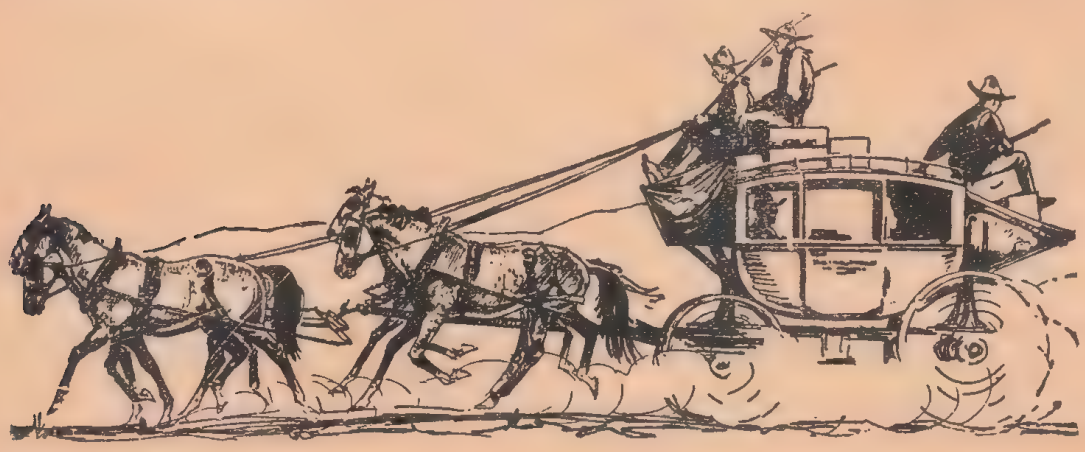
"Joe Raglin said he was going to find Bull Orson. I know that he won't stop until he does. I'm only praying that he won't catch up with him before they get to that Midnight Chasm place and that I can get there ahead of him."

IN the more northerly ranges of the mighty Rockies, where the snow on the peaks and topmost ramparts is never quite conquered by the warmth of summer, the coming of winter in September screams over that high mountain world with sudden Arctic blasts one day after summer ends. But in the southern ranges that form the toes of the great prostrate giant who lies sprawling northward to Alaska, there is a short season of Indian summer, sweetly scented, brilliantly coloured and infinitely soothing before the long sleep of winter.

Into such a world of beauty June Dell rode on the stage that climbed up the long, winding road to the end of her journey. Only when the swaying, rumbling stage came to the pine-dotted edge of the plateau above Silverlode did the smudging, irreverent hand of man appear.

Down there, stretched out for a mile up and down the narrow canyon, lay the new mining town of Silverlode, huddling along the banks of the little foamy, rushing river, or clinging to the mountainsides like parasitic fungus on a dying tree. The sun was setting and already the early lights of evening were blinking in the canyon depths.

In the Silver Strike Hotel, June Dell



found comfortable quarters and a garrulous clerk who went into loquacious ecstasies over her arrival.

"Ah, Miss Dell," he exclaimed. "I seen you in Angelita when I was comin' out here. I heard you sing 'Mother, I'm Comin' Home' and it near 'bout made me turn right 'round and go back to my old mother in Ohio. You come out to sing for Ted Morrissey at the Silver Palace, ain't you? He said he was gonna bring in the best singers and prettiest girls he could find for his new place."

"No," June Dell answered, weary. "I don't intend to sing here—didn't know there was a place hiring singers in Silverlode. I want a good night's rest, then I must go up into the mountains twenty miles or so. Did you ever hear of a place called Midnight Chasm above here?"

"There ain't no town or camp by that name I've heard of," the clerk shook his head dubiously. "Fact, there ain't no towns 'bove here in the mountains."

"It isn't a town; it's a deep, narrow gorge in a mountain, I suppose. A man named Ace Dudley lives in behind the mountain and no one can go in there except through Midnight Chasm."

"Never heard of it, Miss Dell," the clerk answered blankly. "I ain't been here long, though; not long 'nough to know the country outside o' town. I know a old prospector that'd know 'bout it if anybody does. If he ain't layin' in some saloon full o' whisky, I'll find 'im for you by supper-time. He can tell."

But the old prospector was full of whisky and too stupefied to hear the hotel clerk's voice when the latter found him in a near-by saloon. The clerk was anxious to serve June Dell and therefore made diligent inquiries of others about Midnight Chasm.

"I've heerd tell o' Midnight Chasm," one bearded roamer of the mountains verified, "but 'cordin' to the stories I've heerd 'bout it, ain't nobody ever been through it an' come back alive. It's plumb dark when you git in a ways an' they say if you go on in you jest drap down off a sharp ledge into the bottom o' the earth."

The clerk brought this information to June Dell when she came down for supper.

"And didn't anyone know of Ace Dudley?" June asked, glad that at least there was a Midnight Chasm.

"I plumb forgot to ask 'bout him," the clerk apologised. "There's a pretty little Mex girl that was raised in this country. She's got a room here and works for Ted Morrissey's Silver Palace. She's eatin' her supper right over yonder now. Rita Montez is her name. She knows lotsa these men 'round these here mountains. Maybe she'd know this Ace Dudley."

"Take me over to her table and introduce me," June asked.

Rita Montez was a sparkling black-eyed little brunette and very pretty. She was instantly friendly when the clerk introduced her to June Dell.

"Oh, I am glad you have come here to sing, Miss Dell," the dark-eyed girl enthused. "Ted Morrissey will pay you much and the miners, they throw money at your feet, piles of it, if they like you."

"But I haven't come here for that," June told her. "The clerk said you knew this country, that you were raised here. Did you ever hear of a man named Ace Dudley?"

"Ace Dudley!" Rita Montez exclaimed in a loud whisper. "Do you mean the *bandido,* the woman-hating outlaw? He is old and he will not look at a woman, even one so beautiful as you."

"I have a very urgent message for him that he will be glad to get. Does he come here often?"

"One of his men tries to make love to

me," Rita confessed. "He told me one week ago that they go away then on a long trip. I think maybe they go to rob somewhere. They will come back soon, then they will be in here before they go to their mountain home."

"Will Ace Dudley come here with his men?"

"Since I come to work in the Palace last spring, he has come many times there. He drinks and gambles with the men, but he will not give us girls one look. He does not look like a mean man."

In spite of the great fatigue from her journey, the face of June Dell lighted up then with a suddenly formed decision. If Ace Dudley should come to Silverlode immediately on his return, she must see him and the best chance for that would be in this Silver Palace where he would drink and gamble.

"Rita," June cried, hopeful enthusiasm glowing in her eyes, "you must help me. If Mr. Morrissey wants me to sing, I'll be glad to sing in his Silver Palace. Will you ask him for me?"

Rita Montez knew nothing of professional jealousy. With her Latin quickness to hate or to love she had decided that she would love this soft-voiced, beautiful girl. To bring June Dell to Ted Morrissey would be no small feather in her own hat.

"I'll have him here in less than a half hour," she promised her new friend.

CHAPTER VII

IT was the third night of June Dell's singing to the enraptured crowds in the Silver Palace. The place was not greatly unlike Buck Fain's place, except that it was built of mountain-pine logs and hewn timbers.

A dozen pretty girls worked in the Silver Palace, dancing and drinking with the rough-shod customers. It was such a life as was known in a thousand other rough towns of the West where lonesome, women-hungry men came in out of the wild, untamed country to sate their eyes on pleasant feminine charms and thrill to the warm, soft feel of them in their arms.

June Dell had given Ted Morrissey a great surprise and a mystery over which to puzzle. She had agreed to sing for him, greatly to his delight, but only on certain conditions. The first was that she wanted no pay; second, she must be free to leave on short notice; third, and most important, Morrissey must promise to get Ace Dudley to talk with her as soon as he arrived in town.

"Sure and I know Ace Dudley," Morrissey had promised with reservations, "but as to getting the old divil to talk with you, Miss June, now that's a horse of another colour. He don't like wimmen and he'll be for killing me if I ask him, but I'll risk it. Maybe your sweet singing will soften the old divil's heart. We'll see."

It was several days since June had left Angelita. Her nerves were on edge from the long uncertainty. A thousand conjectures tortured her, uppermost being the fear that Joe Raglin had overtaken Bull Orson and his gunmen. He had either been seen first by the outlaws, ambushed and slain without mercy, or had found them, attacked the whole band impetuously and had been overwhelmed by their many guns in spite of his own speed and deadliness.

Ace Dudley's return was delayed longer than his man had promised Rita Montez. Perhaps some catastrophe had befallen him in his danger-beset activities down the renegade trail and he would never return! That possibility, thought of again and again, added to June's torture of suspense. Until very recently her main object had been to find Ace Dudley and give him a message that would ease his sore hurt against one he had known in happier days; now Ace Dudley was secondary; Joe Raglin stood first.

A dozen times a night June would ask Rita Montez if the Dudley band had returned. The question was so often repeated that a mere look of her eyes, plain with anxious inquiry, would bring a negative from the black-eyed girl. When sing-

ing from the stage, June's questioning glance would seek out Rita at a table below, or upon the dance floor and she would receive a sad shake of head to prolong her misery.

On the third night June Dell was singing her second song of the evening. It was about ten o'clock. Except for her voice and the accompaniment of the pianist, the two hundred people in the Silver Palace were silent. She was near the final line of her song when the wide, swinging half-doors at the front of the hall swung inward and spilled a motley crew of seven new arrivals into the place. The newcomers burst in talking loudly, slapping dust from their pants, stomping on the floor. The raucous interruption in the song to which everyone else listened was disturbing. Every eye was turned upon the boisterous ones. June Dell looked and caught her breath, ending her song before the last line.

Bull Orson, black-bearded, dusty and trail-warped, stood ten feet within the doors and stared incredulously at June Dell. The pianist looked up wonderingly at her when she did not finish to his playing. The crowd gave startled glances from the girl to the object of her fear-ridden gaze.

"I'll be a jumpin', foot-racin' terrapin!" Bull Orson bellowed his incredulity. "Look, Spurlock! Ain't that June Dell, or am I jest gone plumb locoed crazy a-thinkin' 'bout her?"

"Yuh ain't crazy yet, Bull," Spurlock told him. "That's June Dell, or I'll chew up a last year's cowhide."

June turned then and hastened from the stage to her room where she shared dressing quarters with the other girls. Rita Montez ran from the floor to the stage and across to where June had gone. Bull Orson seemed about to go toward the stage in pursuit of June Dell, but Link Spurlock restrained him.

"She'll keep," he advised the big man. "Come on an' let's wet our whistles. Yuh don't know," he advised in lower tone, "how these here waddies an' mine grubbers out here'll take your noticin' of that gal."

Rita Montez found June Dell sitting before her dressing-table, pale of face and fright in her eyes.

"June Dell!" she cried, "what happened? What made you so afraid? Tony Olla, the Ace Dudley man I told you about was with that man who looked at you so strangely. Dudley must be in town."

JUNE looked at the little brunette with new fear in her glance.

"Then that must mean that Ace Dudley was killed," she cried. "Rita, go quick and ask Tony Olla! Ask him if Ace Dudley is dead, or if he will be here to-night! That big man with the beard is Bull Orson! I must see Ace Dudley!"

She shoved Rita hurriedly toward the door and pleaded with her again to run on her errand. She had not confided to Rita Montez or anyone else that Bull Orson intended to murder Ace Dudley. She could not be sure who was enemy or friend of the bandit leader.

With Bull Orson here, Joe Raglin must be close behind if he still lived. If he still lived! The doubt stuck icicles into her heart. Maybe he had lost Orson's trail and would be long in finding it again. The thought gave her faint new hope.

She must see and talk to Bull Orson! The thought repulsed her, but if Orson had been overtaken by Joe Raglin and had killed him, he would boast of it. She would find a way to lead him into the boastful confession. Hurrying out to the stage she went down the side steps to where the pianist was banging out a dance tune. She stood waiting for him to finish. He must get Bull Orson to a table for her.

Before the dance tune was finished, while dancers and many others stared at her, she was saved the trouble of asking the pianist to call Orson. The latter came swaggering toward her from the bar. She caught her breath, struggled for self-control.

"Hello, June!" he called his greeting

loudly while still many steps away. "Ain't you surprised to see me, like I was to see you? I nearly tumbled over when I seen you!"

He came on, holding out his big paw for a handshake. She tried, with wan success, to smile at him, and gave him a limp little hand, suppressing a shudder.

"I was surprised, Bull," she admitted, gaining strength over herself with the speech. "Come over to a table and talk. We all had to leave Angelita in such a hurry I suppose there's a lot to talk about."

"Now that's jest the finest idea I ever heard," he roared gleefully, his dark eyes lustful in their gaze. "I'm sure lucky, comin' over here to find June Dell invitin' me to set at a table and drink with her!"

"I don't want to drink, Orson," she protested quickly. "I just want to talk."

She led him to a table and sat down opposite him.

"What sorta place is this," he demanded truculent, "that lets one o' its girls sit at a table with a feller 'out'n the drinks?"

"I don't work the tables or dances, Orson. You know that. Did you know Webb Gude was killed in the fight that night in Angelita?"

"Well, I guess I'd orta know it," he rumbled. "One o' my men was in there and saw the young Texas skunk murder him. My man Spurlock saw it and reckernised the killer, then Spurlock had to leave suddenly, 'cause we had our plans all made to come here."

"If you knew who killed Gude, why didn't you follow him up and kill him? Wasn't Gude your friend?"

"Now, looky here, June," Orson complained in a tone of hurt innocence, "you know I was Webb Gude's friend, but that young killer was jest too fast in makin' his git-away. Then all them ranchers was raising hell when I got there. If I ever run into that feller, I'm sure gonna take his scalp jest for ol' Webb."

He tried to take June's hands across the table, mistaking the brightened, happy look on her face. Her heart was singing again. She drew her hands back into her lap. He reached a hand to catch her arm. She arose, evading his grasp. His face darkened.

"Say," he bellowed, "what's this? You act plumb funny, June Dell! Say! You was dancing with that damn' Texan that night 'fore Webb caught his murderin' lead! Spurlock seen you. You been squeezin' me to git somethin' outa me you wanted to know! I see it in your eyes! Damn—"

He lunged at her across the table, trying to seize her with both hands. She turned and fled up the steps of the stage and was gone out of sight before Bull Orson had taken three steps in pursuit. He halted, a scowl of rage showing above his black beard; saw several local men scowling as darkly at him and turned, mumbling curses, going toward the bar.

RITA MONTEZ had been talking to Tony Olla when June Dell came and met Bull Orson. She had learned what she needed to know by the time June deserted Orson. She found June a little nervous, but surprisingly happier than she had been.

"Why, June," she cried her surprise, "you must like that big blackbeard, the way you look."

"Never mind him, Rita," June replied impatiently. "What about Ace Dudley? Is he coming?"

"Yes. He will come to-night. They had some sort of terrible trouble. Three of them were killed. Tony and one other besides Ace Dudley come back alive. They met this Bull Orson and his four men at the livery stable where they left Ace Dudley and come here to drink."

"Will your friend get Ace Dudley to see me?" June asked. She gripped Rita's arms and looked into the openly readable black eyes and saw disappointment written in them. Rita shook her pretty head.

"Tony says one of their men told too much to a woman in Albuquerque; that the woman caused all their trouble. He says Ace Dudley hates women more than

ever, that he would not ask Dudley to see you for anything in the world."

"Oh, Rita, I must, I *must* see Ace Dudley! I can't tell you how important, how terribly important it is for him and for someone else that I talk to him at once. Watch for him, Rita. Just as soon as he comes in, let me know, point him out to me. I'll get Ted Morrissey to keep his promise and make Ace Dudley see me."

Rita went away to watch for Dudley. A minute later there was a heavy knock on the dressing-room door. June Dell went to the door and found Ted Morrissey, a big, red-faced Irishman, standing there, rather glum.

"Ace Dudley's come in, Miss Dell," Morrissey stated. "I tol' 'im I had a mighty pretty singer here who sure wanted to tell 'im something real important. He just oggled me with them iceballs he's got for eyes and said begorra and be damned if he'd see any woman that ever wore skirts. It was sure final, Miss Dell. I would not be for asking him ag'in."

"Go out and tell Batiste that I'll sing another song for the one I failed to finish," June told Morrissey. "While I'm singing, Mr. Morrissey, you please stand behind Ace Dudley and show me who he is. After I sing I'll ask Mr. Dudley to listen to me."

"All right, gel," Morrissey turned away uncertainly. "It's sure a funny business and I would not be doing it for anybody else but June Dell."

June went out and sang one of her favourites, one into which she could put all the sweetness and depth of her voice and the greatest feeling. She watched Ted Morrissey and saw him indicate a man at the tip of the long horseshoe bar. June marched down to the dance floor as she sang and slowly made her way in the general direction of the bar tip. Everybody was attentive, watching her as they always did — everybody except Ace Dudley. He was scowling as he leaned on the bar, his face partly averted, eyes apparently studying something behind the bar.

June finished her song and stopped for a few seconds to talk with Rita Montez, giving time for the crowd to turn their eyes and attention from her and begin the talk and usual noises again. Batiste, the pianist, started another dance piece.

Gathering all her strength for the ordeal, June went straight over to Ace Dudley. He refused to notice her approach. Bull Orson was glaring at June from beyond Dudley with five men between the two.

"Mr. Dudley," the girl whispered close to the outlaw chieftain's shoulder, "it's life or death to you. Please let me talk to you alone."

Dudley turned his face slowly upon June Dell. Deepset, tragically sad eyes that seemed far out of place in an outlaw's face, gleamed at her. He was a man of fifty years, or little more. His hair under the edge of his hat was partly grey. He slowly removed that hat, turned and made a bow of head and shoulders with courtly dignity to June.

"I'm much obliged to you, ma'am," he said with impersonal frigidity, "but I need no help from a lady. Please let that be final."

He turned his back to her and poured a drink.

Ablaze with humiliation and indignant at the man's adamant attitude, June Dell turned, searching for Rita Montez. She could not risk forcing her warning upon Dudley for fear Orson or his men would hear. They might kill both her and Dudley then.

She found Rita dancing with a dark man of thirty or thirty-five years who seemed, like Rita, to be of Mexican ancestry. June waited at a table for the dance to finish, then gave Rita a signal to come to her and bring her escort. She had made a desperate decision. She would

go into Ace Dudley's secret mountain hideout and throw herself upon his protection. Once she had looked into those eyes that were sad, but not mean, she knew he was the type of man whom no woman need fear. Dudley would have to hear her story then.

Rita came and introduced her dancing partner as Tony Olla. They sat down at June's invitation.

"Mr. Olla, I want to go through Midnight Chasm," June declared without preliminaries, her face pale and grim with decision. "Will you take me?"

THERE was instant consternation on the olive-skinned face of the man. He did not answer at once, but his dark brown eyes studied the face of June Dell.

"What do you know about Midnight Chasm, señorita?" he finally demanded in a quiet, even voice.

"I know that Ace Dudley has his secret place there; that you men go there when you don't want the world to know where you are."

"You know very much, señorita," was the only reply, made in that same, purring soft voice.

"I know very much more that I tried to tell that stubborn leader of yours," June told him. "Are you his friend?"

"Certainlee, señorita."

"Are you a very good friend of Bull Orson?"

"The Señor Orson is a ver-ry brave, beeg man."

"And he is going with you through Midnight Chasm?"

"I did not say, señorita, that we shall go through that Midnight Chasm."

"Ah, Tony," Rita Montez interrupted the chilly colloquy, "June Dell is my friend, *muy simpatica.* She wants to do your *jefe,* Ace Dudley, a very great favour. Give her a little help."

"Ace Dudley *es un tonto!* He is a fool!" Tony said, and for the first time lifted the tone of his voice, speaking resentfully. "He hates women and tells us to hate them. He sometime speak too moch."

"All right, Tony," June Dell said, forcing a smile, "Then I shall not do what I wanted to. Perhaps he is not worth it. *Adios.*"

She went away stinging with defeat. Ace Dudley's own men were turning upon him. Bull Orson would find it easy to murder the stubborn old man and take over his stronghold if all Dudley's men turned against him. Then if Joe Raglin came to kill Orson, his chance of success would be very small, indeed. Suddenly she turned back from the steps to the stage and went looking for Bull Orson. He came at her nod, glowering his doubt upon her as he took a seat beside the table she had chosen.

"Orson," she begged, "when you go into Midnight Chasm, take me with you." Involuntarily her hand pressed against the little derringer she always carried for protection. She would have it to see that Orson kept any promises he might make.

If she had slapped Bull Orson, he could not have flinched more. He stuttered his amazement before answering coherently.

"Of all the—what the devil! How d'you know 'bout Midnight Chasm, June? Who tol' you?" he spluttered.

"I've known about it for years, Orson," she lied. "Getting into and beyond it means something very precious to me. Will you take me to-morrow?"

"Now, looky here, June," he cajoled, "I'm gonna be boss o' things pretty soon in such a way that it'd be plumb easy to take you in there, but jest now I gotta go slow. Wait a week and I'll sure take you in." There was illy suppressed triumph in his voice and manner.

"I've got to go in to-morrow, Orson, and right after Ace Dudley, or I can't go at all, ever."

"That's sure mighty funny talk, June," he said, a flicker of suspicion in his eyes as he stared at her. "You ain't tryin' to pull somethin' over my eyes, are you? If you are, girl, I'll sure break you, good and plenty."

"Will you take me to-morrow, Orson?" she persisted.

"See here, girl," he leaned over and

spoke confidentially, "I'm not sure yet o' gettin' in there to-morrow myself. If I do, I'll come back for you. Once I get in and fixed up, myself, I can take you in."

Would Joe Raglin's arrival be delayed longer than the morrow? And would Ace Dudley relent and talk to her if she did the absurdly reckless thing of going into his hiding-place with Bull Orson? She assumed that Dudley would have left many other men in his mountain hide-out upon whom he could depend. If she had known that Dudley had but three men left, all of whom were resentful of his growing irritability, she would not have considered for one moment the reckless thing she planned to do.

"If you come alone for me to-morrow, or early the next morning, Orson," she promised, "I'll go." Thinking then that Orson might murder Dudley at once, she added, "If Ace Dudley is still there, I will go. There is something there which only he can give me."

That would stir Orson's curiosity and stay Dudley's murder. Orson would want to first learn what it was Dudley could give her, that was of such great importance.

CHAPTER VIII

As the sun set on Joe Raglin's and Jetty Moore's tiresome day of watching in Buck Fain's house of the dead and no indication came that the outlaws would visit the ranch, the keenly disappointed ex-Ranger had to give up. They tied Ben Holt's and Buck Fain's bodies on Ben's horse and headed back north, determined to seek there a new clue as to the trail of Bull Orson.

They came into Angelita late that night. Jetty Moore went on with the dead men while Joe stopped at the stable and awakened old man Becker from his cot in the little office of the livery stable.

"Well, holy jupe!" the old man exclaimed, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. "You're sure back quick, son. No need your tellin' me. I know you ain't had no luck."

"How do you know that, Mr. Becker?" Joe asked, unsaddling his horse.

"I know now that Bull Orson and what of his gang that got safe away from them bullets, run off to the mountings, going on the tall grass. Guess they wanted to throw off any trailers."

"How did you find that out?"

"Ricardo went and studied Orson's horse tracks in front of the Fain saloon, then tracked 'em a long ways up the country."

"Where is he now?"

"Gone out to our ranch. Said if you wanted him to help you trail Orson he'd sure be glad. He hates Bull Orson."

"I hate to ask him or anybody to waste time on my troubles," Joe said gloomily. "It may take a lot longer, but I'll have to find that Orson skunk alone. I'll get a good sleep, see some folks I wanta see to-morrow and get going early. Good night, Mr. Becker."

"Night, son. Sure sorry you missed this first shot."

The old man did not know of Joe's interest in June Dell, or he could have told him of the girl's sudden departure on the west-bound stage. The youth went on to the hotel, registered for a room at midnight and did not ask the clerk about the girl he so madly loved, a very natural reticence with him. He did not know how loyal the crippled clerk had been to his employer, Webb Gude, but at any rate there was no good reason for conversation with him. The town had quieted down, the clerk volunteered to say, after burying its dead. Joe turned back after starting upstairs and asked which was June Dell's room number. The old clerk looked at him with some surprise, started an answer, hesitated, then gave the room number. Joe went on to his room, sorry that he had asked.

Before he retired, Joe was tempted to knock at the door of June Dell and her room-mate, assuming that because Buck Fain's was temporarily closed, they would be already in their room. He listened for a moment at their door, decided they must be asleep and went back to his room to

await morning before calling on the girls.

He slept soundly until after sunrise. When he opened his eyes and saw the sun shining brightly outside, he leaped from the bed and dressed in haste. The loss of any daylight time from the hard job ahead irritated him. He washed in a basin of water there in his room and started down to breakfast. Outside he turned back to the girls' room, anxious to have June Dell breakfast with him. He listened again at their door and heard a girl's voice lightly humming a tune. He knocked.

"Who is it?" a feminine voice demanded.

"Is June Dell in?" he asked.

Feet hit the floor in rapid steps and the door flew open. Daisy Mullens stood there in the sunshine from her window with mouth open, eyes staring, unable for a few seconds to speak.

"For Heaven's sake!" she cried at last. "You're Joe Raglin! Did you find the man you went looking for?"

"No. Where is June Dell?"

"For Heaven's sake!" she repeated her ejaculation. "Great Heavens above! If she had known you was coming back here, she sure wouldn't have traipsed off in such a hurry."

"Where?" Joe snapped, angry with the girl's gaping stupidity. "What do you mean? Where has she gone?"

"Gone looking for you, big, bold badman," Daisy Mullens replied sarcastically, resenting his tone. "Went on the stage yesterday morning after you run away and left her. Went to Silverlode, some new mining town over west somewhere. One of Bull Orson's men that was shot and rearing mad at Orson for running off a-leaving him behind to die, told June while she was nursing him, that Orson was headed for some secret place in the mountains above Silverlode called Midnight Chasm. June thought her handsome, bold badman would sure be hot on Orson's trail, so she up and went to Silverlode to head you off, or help you, or something. I don't know what the crazy girl means to do, but she's gone to Silverlode. And here you are, fooling around, not anxious at all to find Orson. I bet you don't want to!"

The girl's message was so astounding and her manner so maddening that Joe Raglin turned and hurried away without a word of thanks. He felt more like saying something to her which he had never before been guilty of saying to a woman, but curbed his temper. Within the hour he had eaten breakfast, bought supplies for his long journey and was riding away on the trail to Sisto.

The long trip of three days' hard riding, the last part of it climbing into higher altitudes of rough mountain country, was, under Joe's careful handling, not too wearing on long-bodied Midnight. Joe had to shoe him anew in Sisto, a precaution wisely taken because of the rocky ground he had to cover from there on. He took infinite pains to care for the great horse, knowing that he might soon have to call upon him for more than an ordinary horse, worn down with too much travel, could give.

AFTER nightfall of the second day following June Dell's humiliating failure to gain the ear of Ace Dudley, Joe Raglin rode down the flanks of the high plateau into Silverlode. From that moment he was more alert, for if what Daisy Mullens had told him was correct, Bull Orson would be in this town. He found the livery stable and left Midnight enjoying his supper and the rest he needed.

He had seen the Silver Strike Hotel before he found the livery stable, so he returned to it now and first registered for a room before making the inquiries he was intensely anxious to have answered. He felt sure that June Dell would be in this hotel, which was apparently the only hotel the new town afforded.

"Is there a young lady here by the name of Miss June Dell?" he asked the clerk.

"Oh, sure she was here, mister——" the clerk hesitated and glanced at Joe's name again on the register, "Mister Raglin. She checked out just this mornin', went away a-horseback with a big man with a black beard name o' Orson."

Joe Raglin jumped as if a bullet had cut into him. He put out his hands and leaned on the hotel counter, staring at the clerk with darkening grey eyes, trying to convince himself that he had heard wrong, or that perhaps the man was mistaken about the girl and the man.

"Did I hear right, pardner?" he asked, after a struggle to master the vocal chords that for a few seconds seemed paralyzed. "Did you say that June Dell rode away to-day with Bull Orson?"

"Yeah, that's right, Mister Raglin. I remember she said his name was that, and she said if she wasn't back here in a few days that it would mean something was bad wrong and she would be in trouble. She left full details with her girl friend that stays here and works where Miss Dell sung for a while, at the Silver Palace down the river-front street there a ways." He nodded in the direction of the place where Joe had seen the bright lights of the Silver Palace.

"What's her girl friend's name?"

"Rita Montez, a pretty little Mex girl. You'll find her in the Silver Palace workin' the tables and dance floor now —jest left for work not long ago."

Joe reeled out of the hotel as if drunk, for he was dazed, unable to believe that the thing was true which he had heard. There was no sense to it. June Dell could never have gone willingly away with Bull Orson. It was too crazy a thing for her.

He was wearing two guns now, having secured an extra .38 in Angelita, but that attracted little attention in this wide-open new town. Nearly every second man there in the Silver Palace whose accoutrement he took time to glance at, was decorated with two six-guns. He asked for Rita Montez and she came to him immediately, a little surprised when she saw that he was a stranger. She had thought a regular customer who liked her above the other girls was asking for her company.

She led him to a table in the corner when he asked for a chance of private conversation. So that he might claim her time he ordered drinks for the two of them.

"You are a friend of June Dell's?" he asked her when the drinks were left before them.

"Yes," she answered quickly, looking sharply at his features. "You are Joe Raglin."

"How do you know that?" he asked. Too many unexplainable things, unreasonable things, were popping out at him.

"After June Dell describes the man she loves, one must surely know him on sight. You must be a very wonderful man, Joe Raglin."

That irked him, but he remembered how his loss of temper in the Valley House at Angelita had stirred the sharp tongue of Daisy Mullen. He now controlled his impatience.

"I beg pardon, little girl," he tried to seem unhurried when he wanted to shout his questions at her and be gone with her answer. "I don't want to make you think I'm a rough clod of a feller, but I heard that June Dell went away to-day with Bull Orson, a man she knows is plumb poisonous. They said you would know. What about it?"

She told him then of how June had tried to make Ace Dudley listen to her, that Bull Orson meant to murder Ace and take over his mountain fastness; told him of how Tony Olla had shown signs of treachery to Dudley. Finally, she told him of June Dell's last desperate resort to get into Dudley's retreat, so she could tell him of Orson's intended duplicity.

"But why in the devil would she be so het up to save the life of that owl-hooter, Dudley?" Joe wanted to know, mystified by the tangled story. He couldn't see any sense to June's actions, even though she had expressed great interest in find-

ing Ace Dudley, she could not have reason enough to run this terrible risk.

"She didn't tell me, but I make one big guess that she wants Ace Dudley to kill Bull Orson and his men, so they won't have a chance to kill the man she loves so much."

JOE RAGLIN arose with such violence that the untouched glasses of drinks on the table toppled over, spilling the liquor. He looked down at Rita Montez with such a fierce, sudden change of demeanour that she drew back from him in fright as he leaned on the table.

"She would do that?" he demanded, cold fury overcoming his better sense. "June Dell would do that to me? You're not lying to me, girl? Is all this true that you have told me?"

"Certainly, Joe Raglin, it is every word of truth," she insisted, paling. "I tried to get June not to go. I was so very much afraid for her, but she was crazy for fear you would get here first and all those men would be too many for you. If you go into the Midnight Chasm alone, they will kill you easy. An old prospector here swears that several men have tried to explore it and have never come back. It is because the robbers kill them to keep the secret of their hiding-place. That is what I know from Tony Olla."

"How do they kill them? Where?" he asked, tensed to run.

"It is a long, dark crack through the side of a crater, not like a canyon, but dark at the bottom in the middle of the day. There was a volcano there thousands of years ago and Midnight Chasm is a break in the side of the old volcano made by the blowing up from down under. The robbers' place is beyond that crack, in the old crater where trees and grass grow thick now. A guard is always just over the mouth at the inside end of that Midnight Chasm, so Tony says. The guard kills strangers that come through. Tony Olla told me that much when he was drunk once, then when he was sober again he threatened to kill me if I ever told. You are the first I have told. I would not tell you, but I know that you are going there."

"You're damned right, I'm going there, girl!" he grated at her. "June Dell is in Bull Orson's hands. She was crazy to trust herself to him, or to the other crook she calls Ace Dudley!"

"No, she wasn't so crazy as you think, trusting herself to Ace Dudley. He hates women and if he kills Orson, as he certainly will if he will hear what June wants to tell him, then Dudley will send June back here safe and all right."

"Where is that man you said knows the way to that Midnight Chasm?"

"That is the old prospector who knows the way, over there with that white-haired girl. He's not so drunk to-night. His money is running out."

She pointed to a grizzled, wrinkled old man. He was trying to make himself lively with a blonde woman who was past her first bloom of maidenhood. Joe strode over and interrupted the old man's gaiety.

"Mister," he said, "please help a pardner out of a tight spot. I'll pay you well for a little help. Can I talk to you a minute on mighty serious business?"

"Sure, sure, son, anything to help a feller in trouble," he bobbed his head as if he was fairly mellowed with liquor, but not staggering drunk. "Come back in a little spell, Susie," he told the woman. "Gotta talk business now. Gonna sell this young feller a gold mine, then you'n me'll blow in Denver." He cackled at his own wit.

"Now, what is it, son?" the old man squinted his eyes and asked.

Joe sat down beside him.

"You know the way to Midnight Chasm?" he asked quietly.

"Surest thing in the world, but I ain't a-goin' there. The best, quickest way to die is go pokin' your lickerpaint into that dark ol' crack. By ganny, son, I know of too many healthier places to roam."

"I don't want you to go in the Chasm, mister," Joe assured him. "But I'll pay you fifty dollars to show me the outside end if you'll start to-night."

"To-night! Goshawmighty, man, it's near midnight right now. We need some sleep 'fore we tackle that ride. It's twenty mile, or near'bout that."

"But a girl's life is in danger. If we wait till morning it might be too late to save her."

"Huh?" The old fellow leaned closer. "A gal in danger? Well now, son, that's tough. Sure I'll go show you the way in and if the gal's a-hangin' in that big crack, in danger o' droppin' in, we'll save her, but I sure ain't hankerin' to play none in that hole. It's worse than ha'nted. Git us two good horses. I ain't got nothin' but these pesky, slow mountain burros. Bring the horses out front 'gin I wrap my goozle 'round another drink to warm me up on the ride."

He arose and walked with an agility that surprised Joe Raglin, going toward the bar. Joe whirled and hurried away to get Midnight and another horse. He was forgetting the bed he had paid for, forgetting doubly well now because he was riding to save June Dell and to find Bull Orson.

CHAPTER IX

THE late moon had come peeping over the mountains by the time Joe Raglin and his old guide rode up the narrow little valley above Silverlode. They passed the mine workings where the rich vein of ore had been discovered which was the town's one reason for being. Beyond that the road became nothing but a path that was beaten and marked only by the hoofs of horses, burros and wild animals that had wandered back and forth, to and from the high ranges with the changes of the seasons.

The moon's rays lighted the west side of the narrowing valley and the heights above, but the two hurrying riders followed the trail in the shadow of the east mountain wall.

Night-roving animals scurried away before them or jumped across the trail, moving like wraiths in the uncertain light. A mountain cat howled his blood-chilling scream from some shadowed promontory ahead, sounding like a human being's last terrified cry for life in the clutches of death.

"Reckon that panther'll jump us?" Joe asked the old denizen of these wilds. "He's pretty close on our path, isn't he?"

"Naw, son. Too much easy food here-'bouts for him to be pouncin' on humans. He'll skeer away from us quick. What's your handle, young feller?"

"Joe Raglin."

"Mine's Boston, or they calls me that so long I most forgot my other name. I come out from Boston to St. Louie when I was jest a shaver, then took to trappin' with Kit Carson and them other fellers and fin'ly got the gold fever. It was me that said soon's they found all that gold in Californy that there'd be plenty gold to be dug out in these here big mountains. Some laughed at me till they made the big findin's up on the South Platte that started Denver a-boomin'. I got a claim or two staked out over west, son, that'll make us richer'n Croesus. I'd take in a likely younker like you. Wanta throw in with me?"

"Thanks, Boston," Joe replied, only half sure of what the old-timer had been telling. "I'm a cowman from the Texas prairie country. These mountains hem me in too much; seem like they're always crowding down, 'bout to fall on me. I like the open country, the tall grass and bawling cattle."

Joe did not encourage the garrulous guide to talk. The trail was not wide enough for them to ride abreast and because the old man was leading the way on his livery-stable mount, long-stepping, high-spirited Midnight continually crowded the smaller horse, abetted by Joe's own impatience. He wanted to reach Midnight Chasm in time to tackle its guardians at the break of day or before, when they would be least watchful.

From the scanty description of the Chasm which he had received, he was left to the vaguest sort of conjectures. He

surmised that horses could be ridden through it since the outlaws made their hideout in the old crater within the mountain. It would be dark, of course, but he could trust to Midnight to find the way if other horses had gone through. He would go slowly and if the light of the moon or the coming day showed ahead at the exit, he would dismount and reconnoitre for the guard Rita Montez had mentioned.

They reached the head of the little valley, where the small stream that was a river lower down came tumbling in a tiny waterfall over the layers of lava rock. From there on the trail followed a labyrinthian course among ghostly formations of rock, where plant life was scarce and stunted. A great mountain wall loomed up before them in the distance, grey and forbidding in the moonlight.

"The big crack is in the side o' that mountain there, straight ahead where we're headin' to," the guide explained. "I sure hope you know what you're 'bout to git into, young feller. I git a sorta cold sweat when I come clos't to that place. I heerd so many leary stories 'bout it. How'd that gal come to git in there, or was you jokin', maybe, and got somethin' else in mind?"

"She's on the other side of that crack, Boston, with the toughest bunch of owl-hoot skunks that ever shot a man in the back. I'm going through, but I don't want your help more'n to show me the crack where they go into Midnight Chasm, then you can turn 'round and hit for Silverlode. If I don't come out in a few days, I don't s'pose there'll be anything left of me."

"Goshawmighty!" old Boston exclaimed. "I never heerd tell of no robber roost bein' in there. Maybe that 'counts for them as have gone in and never come back. Them robbers didn't want 'em findin' out 'bout their roost. Goshawmighty! Why don't you git help 'fore you go in?"

"I thought of that first thing," Joe told him, "but from what I hear, they could defend the hole against a thousand as well as against one man. I figure one man has a better chance to slip in than a big bunch. Maybe I can do nothing but scout the place out, then come back for help if I see a way to use such help."

"You've got aplenty nerve, young feller. I've fit grizzlies with nothin' but a bowie-knife, and fit Indians with 'em howlin' 'round us, twenty to one, but I wouldn't go through Midnight Chasm like you're doin'."

"Maybe if you had as much reason as I have, you'd go in," Joe grimly told him.

TWO miles farther brought them up against the sheer wall of the mountain, where long ago some mighty explosion deep in the bowels of the earth had shoved a thousand billion tons of solid rock far up into the sky. A wide fissure in the face of the perpendicular wall of the mountain was easily visible because of its black depths within. At the entrance it was about twenty feet wide, with a fairly straight, uniform width as far up the wall as Joe Raglin could see in the moonlight.

They had made better time coming up than Joe had counted on. It lacked at least three hours of daylight. Since the Chasm was reported to be dark, anyway, even during the daytime, he might as well go on at once with his perilous adventure. Maybe the guards would be asleep at this late hour of the morning.

He paid the old guide fifty dollars, dismissed him in spite of his offer to go in with him, and urged Midnight toward the dark recesses within the Chasm. Boston stood his pony out there in the moonlight, watching the youth and mumbling to himself. Perhaps the feverish call to adventure, such as had stirred his blood to high pitch of thrills in other days, was now tempting him, but the young man had turned him back; did not want him. When the black bulk of Midnight merged with the other midnight blackness within the Chasm, Boston turned his pony again toward Silverlode, wondering if he would ever see the cowboy again.

For a hundred yards beyond the first shadows of the Chasm, Joe could see ahead for a short distance by aid of the reflected moonlight. After that the crack overhead appeared to close and a solid, opaque wall of darkness hid the trail ahead. Midnight trembled and champed his bits, throwing his head up and down nervously, his ears pointing forward. Joe let the horse take his time. When all vestiges of light faded behind, he stopped Midnight and let him stand for a while until he should accustom his eyes to the darkness, then made him walk onward. If there was any slightest filter of light seeping into that pall ahead, indistinguishable to the less sentitive eyes of man, the night eyes of the horse would sift it and see enough to pick his way.

Something whirred and sifted the air past Joe's ear. He dodged low over the saddle and held up on the reins, stopping Midnight's slow walk. Cold chills ran through his whole frame like flashes of lightning. He could not be sure if it was the peculiar atmospheric blasts of this deep hole in the mountain or just his nerves in reaction against the unearthly eeriness.

After a half minute of listening to a faint, plaintive squeaking at some indeterminate distance, he nudged Midnight onward again in a slow walk. The horse flung his head and emitted a snort that sounded like low thunder against the pressing walls of the Chasm. Another whirr tore the air in front of Joe's face and before he could dodge, the whirring thing grazed his cheek with a coldly clammy feeling and was gone instantly.

"Bats!" he told himself, greatly relieved, and began to breathe much easier.

For a little while he urged Midnight at a faster walk, sure that the featherless night fliers of the cave would not be there in such numbers if the guarding watchers of the Chasm were near.

An outjutting point of rock raked his shoulders. He put his hand out and felt rough, sharp-edged rocks on his right. The tight "feel" of the place made him reach out to the left. There he touched another wall. After another minute of going, he jerked up suddenly on the reins and held them tight. Midnight seemed to understand the signal. He stood perfectly still. The only sound he made was his light breathing and the consequent small creaking of saddle leathers.

Joe had caught a noise that sounded suspiciously like the murmur of distant human voices. When he had listened for a whole minute and heard no recurrence, he went on. The narrow, pressing walls appeared to recede. A feeling of wider space came over the youth, then it expanded more until he felt that he was in a tremendous vacuum. Midnight was going more slowly and frequently put his head down near the ground, breathing heavily.

Finally, the fearful horse stopped altogether and again let out a loud snort. The fluttering, roaring sound echoed as if in a vast, empty hall. There was a definite feeling of endless space at his right. He tried to make Midnight go onward, but instead of obeying, the great horse backed up a step or two. Joe had a strange sensation vibrating from the saddle, as if Midnight was settling and gathering his strength for a leap or high jump. The youth suffered his first unmistakable attack of fear.

To his shocked imagination came the picture of Midnight on the brink of a precipice above a bottomless void and faithfully, in obedience to his urging, leaping out into black space for the other side that did not exist. Instinctively he held up on the reins, holding the black from that fatal plunge, for he was sure that the feeling was not inspired wholly by unassisted imagination. There was too definite a sensation of emptiness in at least one direction and that might be there just ahead.

Suddenly, out of the void to the right, scarcely twenty feet away and above

him, a match spluttered and the light, held behind some obstruction, shone against rock walls. Joe Raglin's right hand automatically seized the butt of a gun and lifted it as the glare of light swiftly increased until its bright reflection lighted up the cavernous place. The light revealed to his darting glances a gate of five poles five feet high just ahead across the narrow path. The gate was swung from a post planted on the outer edge of the path. A sloping wall of rock filled all the space at his left. His first hasty glance at that wall was too quick to show him the log hanging there horizontally with precarious hold, ready to roll down upon him, but he did recognise the black nothingness of the abyss he had felt a moment before.

THAT abyss yawned at him not three feet away on the right of Midnight's feet. He saw it, realised its gaping close menace. His quick glance turned back to the glaring light someone was making behind the ledge of rock up there across that black well of invisible depths. Only seconds had elapsed since the match had splutttered, but in those ticking seconds Joe had seen the impossibility of going ahead and the equal impossibility of turning Midnight around on that narrow ledge of a trail to beat a retreat. If he tried backing his mount, the animal's rear feet might slip over the edge.

Overcoming his first rattling shock, Joe settled his gaze upon the light just in time to see a hand and arm shoot up into view, holding a ball of flame. That glaring ball of fire was thrown out across the intervening abyss and fell upon the path close to that barrier gate of poles. Midnight started to rear backwards from that frightening flame, but his now cool, quick-thinking master spoke to him and jerked down on the reins, restraining the horse, aware of what a catastrophic tragedy one short misstep would bring.

The ball of fire was obviously an oil-soaked roll of cloth wrapped about a piece of wood or stone. It flamed and smoked, lighting the cavern clearly, revealing the path ahead, along the ledge there beyond that pole gate, with the black depths of the abyss continuing on as far as the light reached. A half-minute had passed since the startling first crack of that match and still no one had spoken from above that screening ledge. Joe became impatient, angrily so.

"Well, what's the play, feller?" he demanded of the unseen person who had thrown the light.

"Jest waitin' for you to see how plumb hopeless it is," a voice replied. Then a head poked over the rim of rock. "'Fore you go shootin' and a-howlin' down into that big hole. We've dropped big rocks down in that hole and never heard 'em hit bottom, but you'll find bottom down there somewhere—you and your horse."

"So it's you!" Joe accused, recognising the man who had quit the dance to warn Webb Gude. "I might have known it'd take a yeller cuss like you to kill a man this way and not look 'im in the face."

Joe guessed that Orson had already assumed control of the robber roost and had therefore put one of his own men to guard the entrance. He expected a bullet very soon and it would come from behind those jagged rocks of the man's hiding-place, with no chance to give a return bullet. It was because of that that he tried to chide the killer's bravado into showing more of himself, even if only momentarily for the killing shot.

"Oh, we'll be lookin' at you, all right, through these here cracks," the fellow boasted. "We wanta see how you look when you go shootin' down on your way to hell. You're gonna bounce offa that goat track in jest 'bout two shakes now. You cain't go ahead and you cain't turn 'round, and if you try to go backin' out, that'll jest bring the log there down on you all the quicker to shove you on your way."

Joe turned his glance quickly to look at the log braced against the slanting rock wall on his left.

"See them three or four rocks scotched

under the ends of that log?" the man directed. "Well, me and my pardner up here are jest gonna aim a bullet apiece at them scotchin' rocks. It'll jest take one little bullet to knock them rocks out at each end and let that log swipe you off into the hole. Now ain't you plumb sorry you ever tried to follow us into Midnight Chasm?"

While the hidden gunman was making his gloating speech, Joe's eyes were busy and his mind was working to desperate decisions. It was as the man had said, utterly impossible to back Midnight up in time to escape that smashing log, once it was released. It was instantly evident that the bracing rocks needed but a little jolt to knock them out of place and release the log. In his quick backward glance he saw how the outlaws reached their hiding-place, by going around the end of the black hole back there a little way and up over the jagged rocks to their place of concealment.

The only way out was ahead, over that five-foot gate of poles across the path with but three or four feet width of the ledge on which Midnight could land after his high jump. Would the great horse make the jump over that flaming torch there on the path and over that pole barrier? He was glad then that he had been so careful on the long ride from Angelita in husbanding the strength of his horse.

"All right," he said, pretending a tone of defeat, one wild, forlorn ray of hope beckoning him there ahead, "go on and do your damnedest. You've got me."

He was looking at that barrier of poles as he spoke. Then he pressed knees to the sensitive horse's sides in warning. The black pair of ears pointed rearward, awaiting the signal which that pressure of knees foretold. Reins were tightened, to be loosened in the second of leaping action.

"All right, Tony," the gunman said. "What say we finish it? I'm right anxious to see that long-legged Texas tick go kickin' and clawin' on his way to hell. You ready?"

"Ready, *amigo,*" Tony replied.

"All right," Spurlock went on, squeezing the moment of his last gloating iota of vengeance, "let 'im feel it comin'. I'll count three, then let go at them rocks. Now! One! Two! *Three!*"

CHAPTER X

WHILE the gunman counted the signal for firing, Joe Raglin spoke to Midnight in a low, tense voice, preparing him. The big black was tautened in every muscle and all a-tremble to be gone. The double explosion of shots was Joe's own signal. He felt the galvanic spurt of energy under him as the thunderous burst of guns sent Midnight into a flying start.

Joe threw his body forward and kicked the horse's ribs. Midnight's feet hit the path once before the pole bars. Joe lifted on the reins as he cried, "Up and take it, Midnight!"

He felt the magnificent animal lifting into the air with the might and power of the legendary flying Pegasus. A lightning side glance as they left the ground showed him the hurtling log shooting down upon the path. It must have struck the ledge while horse and rider were in mid-air over the top of the poles, for the glaring light, lying there in the pathway of that crashing log, danced suddenly, and went over the brink into the big hole of darkness, throwing an eerie, fast disappearing light into that abode of eternal night below.

Joe felt Midnight hit solid ground, but all visibility had by that time disappeared with the falling torch. How near to the brink of the abyss they had landed he could not guess. In that moment the outlaw and his segundo, Tony, shouted in frantic unison and began firing at the pathway ahead of him. He could do nothing but let Midnight have his head and trust to the good Dame Fortune who had already seen him over his worst hurdle.

A bullet kicked through the cantle of

the saddle and ripped the skin of his left hip. He knew at once, even as he flinched from the pain, that the sharp sting of it proved the wound was not deep. He leaned over the saddle horn to reduce the size of target for the bullets that kept zipping by, his fear only partly inspired by those hornets of death. His greatest danger was still that unknown deep at his right. At any step Midnight could still slip into it. Only the animal's keen instinct could save them now.

The rock wall at the left once brushed his clothes and he knew that the horse was keeping as far as possible away from the brink of the ledge. Midnight slowed down and seemed uncertain of his course. A long chance shot sent a bullet droning off the rocks a short distance behind, but the two killers back there were lessening their futile barrage. No more shots were fired and Joe played out the reins, letting Midnight make his own decisions.

The horse snorted, head down, and turned sharply to the left, walking now, still breathing heavily. Every few steps he snorted again, which, by some inexplicable means, is one way in which a good horse feels his way through impenetrable darkness.

With a surge of immeasurable relief, Joe felt the close proximity of solid substance now on both sides of him. He reached out his hands. The right one touched rock surface and dragged over it. His left did not touch anything, but he was certain that the abysmal hole in the mountain had been left behind. Midnight went forward with greater confidence and shortly made another bend. Light shone ahead—moonlight!

They came out into the clear, good air of the mountain and the glorious moonlight, with the stars glittering above, a sight which Joe had thought but a few short minutes ago he would never again see. There were trees, a thick growth of them, out under the short slope which was piled with a great jumble of rocks there by the foot of the crater wall above.

The rim of the mountain, or extinct volcano, was visible in its towering, circular immensity, revealed by the moon, which climbed now toward the zenith of the heavens. In the clear night air it seemed less than a mile across to the north side of the crater wall, but Joe knew the deceptiveness of distances in this rarefied mountain atmosphere and guessed that it might easily be three miles. Judging by the luxuriance of the forest growth before him, this must be a little secluded paradise. No wonder Ace Dudley had made it his secret retreat once he had learned how to reach it.

A trail had been cleared down through that ring of fallen rocks under the crater rim. Jim directed Midnight on down to the timber, following the trail. This would lead to the camp or houses of the outlaws. There he would find June Dell, no doubt, now a prisoner of Bull Orson, if the latter had already taken possession of Ace Dudley's little empire.

He must hurry if he would find the outlaw's place before the entrance guards could come out and spread the alarm over his arrival.

Coming to the fairly level floor of the crater, where the dust of untold centuries had filled in the crevices, Joe brought Midnight into a fast fox-trot gait and sped over the ground along a well-marked trail leading among the high, shadowing columns of the trees. He rode onward for more than a mile, coming quite near to the eastern rim of the surrounding mountain, watching the trail ahead as far as he could see through the patches of moonlight that trickled through the tree-tops.

The watchful horse under him gave the first indication that they were coming to that which he sought. Midnight perked up his ears, looking forward, the first time since leaving the Chasm that he had made such a gesture. Joe slowed him down to a walk and looked more keenly for sign ahead.

TURNING a bend where the trail led on a gradual slant upward, the youth saw log-houses in a partly-cleared spot a hundred yards away.

He reined Midnight off into the deeper shadows of the forest above the trail and picked a way, fending off limbs from switching his face, hunting a place to leave the horse safely away from the houses and the trail.

Up under the shadow of the eastern rim, by the edge of the forest, he dismounted and dropped the reins to the ground. He went over Midnight's body with his hands, hastily and carefully, feeling for possible wounds inflicted by those bullets in the Chasm. To his great joy he found no sign of injury to the beloved animal. He examined the wound on his left hip. It had bled considerably, but was now clotted, and as it was a light surface furrow scratched by the half-spent, warped bullet, he did not even take time to dress the wound.

A few steps brought him through the trees and in sight of the log huts which were built on a levelled promontory of ground twenty or thirty feet higher than the main floor of the forested crater. Among trees back of the houses there were sheds within a corral. In the moonlight Joe saw a number of horses, drooping in sleep there on the ground of the corral.

If the guards had horses at the mouth of the Chasm, it would be but a few minutes more until they would come. He must work fast. Boldly he ran out across the clearer ground, seeking to follow the shadows cast by tree-tops as much as possible. As he came in back of the houses he saw that there were three, one apparently just a storage cabin in back of the more southerly of the two long, low-roofed log houses. Thirty yards separated the two larger houses, each of which was windowless.

Joe dropped in by the storage cabin, hiding himself for a few seconds in its shadow while he listened to the distant beat of horse-hoofs coming in a fast run. If the outlaws were divided, some sleeping in each of the houses, he was lost. If they were all together and he could get into the right house before the alarm was sounded, he would have a chance to shoot it out with them. His most disturbing worry in this connection was June Dell. Where would the girl be?

He must find Bull Orson and give him the first bullet. From what Rita Montez had told him, he figured there would be eight outlaws altogether. Two coming now from the Chasm left six here. He ran for the door he could see in the back end of the nearest house. It opened to his first effort. He stepped into the dark room.

He faced a difficulty now of which he had not thought. The windowless place, dark as pitch, gave him no opportunity to see his way, or even tell if anyone was in the house at all. He had no time to think out a better plan, so he started walking ahead, making no effort to soften his footsteps. This would awaken his enemies and their movement or talk would place them for him.

His shoulder brushed against some metal object hanging on a wall peg. From the smells now he realised that he was in a kitchen. The pan against which he brushed fell to the floor with a loud bang and clatter.

"Who's that?" a gruff voice demanded from the forward part of the house.

Joe felt his way quickly and found the door from the kitchen into that front section of the cabin, whence had come the voice.

"Who's that? What're you doing?" came a second commanding query. No other person seemed to stir in there as Joe went forward.

"It's me," he answered. "Is Bull here?"

"You know damn' well he's not in here," the man replied in a rage. "Get back into your own cabin! Who're you? One of Orson's men?"

"Are you Ace Dudley?" Joe asked, a strange, intriguing new idea coming to him.

"What the devil!" the man cried, a rising tone of angry perplexity in his voice now; then he listened a second or two as running horses came along the forest trail. "What's going on? Why do

you ask that when every man here knows this is my cabin and nobody's allowed in it but me. Who's that coming on those horses?"

"You're Ace Dudley, then," Joe went on. "Tell me quick if that's your name."

"That's my name. Now tell me what you're up to and then——" He was still speaking furiously when Joe interrupted him and he stopped to listen.

"Listen, Ace Dudley," Joe hastened to explain, "I'm not one of yours or Orson's men. I'm an outsider, but I'm not a lawman and not after you. I've come to do you the biggest favour a man ever did you. Them men out yonder and Bull Orson are planning to murder you and take over your fine hideout here for themselves, with Orson as the boss. Your own men are turning against you because you won't let them have women in here. Will you believe me and save yourself?"

"Why should you come troubling yourself telling me such a crazy yarn?" Dudley demanded. Joe heard him fumbling around by his bed.

"Because you and me are topping the same bronc. They're gonna try to kill both of us. Where is the woman that Orson brought here yesterday?"

"She's locked in the little cabin out back, with stout walls to protect her from them women-crazy fools in the other house."

The running horses outside came to a noisy end of their run and the guard's voice was yelling, quickly joined by that of Tony.

"Hey, wake up! Out everybody! Jump on it! That Texan, Raglin, got in here! Wake up, Bull!"

"See," Joe told Dudley. "They come hollering to Orson as their leader, not to you."

"That's an Orson man," Dudley countered, a sinister note in his tone. "So you're that Texan Orson was telling about. Are you the one that killed Webb Gude in Angelita?"

"He was trying to kill me," Joe defended himself, wondering if he was not a fool to try to convince this hard-headed man. "Are you going to believe me when I tell you they mean to kill you?"

"I'll find out the truth. If you're lying to me you'll die for it and for daring to come through the Chasm. I don't know how you ever got through."

JOE knew the man was dressing. A match spluttered. Dudley held the flame to a lamp-wick. When the greater light flared up he looked at Joe Raglin darkly, studying him from a distance of fifteen feet. There was no fear in the middle-aged, sagging face as his deep-set eyes beamed upon the younger man. He reached and seized his gun-belt from a chair-knob and buckled it on, the gun dragging at his right hip.

There was much noise of talk now over around the other cabin. Bull Orson's voice was heard giving orders.

"Run to the gal's cabin," he shouted, "and see if he's grabbed her out! Some o' you scatter 'round the bushes and see if you find 'im! Scatter!"

"Did you listen to what the girl had to tell you?" Joe asked Dudley.

"I wouldn't talk to her," Dudley snapped, glaring at Joe. "I swore years ago that I'd never talk to a woman again. One of the deceiving wenches got me sent up to prison by her lies. I had been fool enough to think I loved her and she had pretended to love me just to frame me for another man's crime, the man she was really in love with. I'm keeping that girl out there from my men because I don't want them to go losing their heads. I don't know what I'm to do with her, because no outsider can be turned loose, knowing about this place."

"Hey, Dudley!" Orson yelled just beyond Dudley's front door, "What you doin'? Ain't you woke up yet?"

"Yes, I'm awake," Dudley replied. He hesitated, seemingly uncertain what further to say to Bull Orson, while he looked doubtfully at Joe Raglin.

"Well, why the devil ain't you doin' somethin'?" Orson demanded. "That Texan skunk that I was telling you 'bout got in here somehow. You better snap out here and help find 'im."

"He's already showing you up as a weakling to your men, Dudley," Joe declared, "laying the groundwork for putting you out."

Ace Dudley glared at Joe then with more rancour than before.

"I'm a weakling, am I?" he demanded hotly. "I'll show you!"

He started as if going toward his front door, his hand on his gun-butt, then whirled, gun out, covering Joe Raglin with a steady, threatening muzzle.

"Put 'em up, Texas Ranger!" he commanded coolly. "I'll show you how to come in here and try to pull such a fool trick on me. Turn your back and keep 'em up!"

CHAPTER XI

ON the verge of turning to do as he was commanded, helpless for the moment to do otherwise, Joe Raglin was halted by cries which came simultaneously from both ends of the house, outside. The voice at the back end yelled, "She's still locked in, all right, Bull!"

At the front door of Ace Dudley's house the booming voice of Bull Orson roared at the door and his stomping boots arose to the top of the steps.

"What the hell you doin', Dudley?" he shouted, his hand rattling the door, then the door squeaked on its hinges as it was shoved half open.

Dudley had come on until he was a man's length away from Joe Raglin. The latter had not turned and Dudley did not repeat the command to do so, although his gun, held just in front of him was bearing upon the youth's middle. Both of them listened to the shouts from outside. Joe saw a frown of resentment flash on the features of Ace Dudley at the tone and words of Bull Orson and saw the moment of doubting hesitation.

Only then Joe thought of Buck Fain and wanted to tell Dudley of him, but there was no time.

"Look out!" he snapped the words low and tensely at Ace Dudley, his eyes looking past the older man and towards the door. "He's gonna shoot you!"

Bull Orson's black-beared face had pushed in through the door and his startled eyes glared widely at the instant when Joe gambled a lie for his life. Ace Dudley sprang sideways and whirled to face the door. Joe's hands moved like twin pistons, coming up filled with guns. The door slammed shut as Joe's guns threw flame and lead into it, shaking the low-roofed cabin with the double roar.

"You tricked me!" Ace Dudley gritted at Joe. "You lied——"

"Listen!" Joe cried and waved one gun toward the door, but watched the outlaw chieftain as he did so.

"What'd I tell you!" Bull Orson was shouting in excited rage. "Dudley's got that Texan in there—in his house—protectin' him—hidin' him from us! Dudley's turned on us! Come on, you men, come back here! Surround the house and take 'em! Both o' them shot at me. Ace Dudley tried to kill me!"

"That's a damned lie, Bull Orson!" Ace Dudley shouted through the walls, while he stepped quickly toward the lamp and blew it out. "You're lying to my men, Orson, to turn 'em against me. You lied about why you brought that woman in here. Are you out there, Sutcliffe?"

"Hear 'im tryin' to crawl outa the hole he's in!" Orson shouted. "He knows the jig's up! He was keepin' plumb quiet in there with that sneakin' devil of a Texan; gonna slip 'im out and not let us get 'im! Looky! He's blowed out the light in

there and that Texas skunk right in there with 'im and still got his guns, 'cause he shot at me—they both shot at me!"

Orson was working himself into a great froth to make his charge stick. Dudley broke into his ravings again.

"Sutcliffe! Are you out there?" Dudley shouted.

"Yeah, Ace, I'm here," a man replied from beside the house on the south.

"Do you believe that liar, Orson, Sutcliffe, or are you still my friend?" Dudley asked.

"I'm your friend, Ace, o' course," came the equivocal answer, hesitatingly, "but what you doin' protectin' that outsider that's come in here meanin' no good to us?"

"Hear me, Sutcliffe," Dudley spoke with great feeling in his voice. "This fellow had slipped into my house while I was asleep. When I waked and found him, he had the drop on me and could have killed me easy. I talked with him while I dressed, lighted my lamp and got my gun on. He said he meant me no harm if I would believe his story. His story was that Bull Orson had come here to kill me and take over our layout. I believed he was lying just to make me turn against my own men and help him, because I didn't see how he could know what Orson meant to do. I pretended to believe him until I got my gun on and pulled it on him quick when he was off-guard. I was just ready to take his guns away from him when Orson looked in that door——"

"He's a liar!" Orson shouted in front of the house. "He was standing right up close to that Texas lobo, intimate as could be and the Texan still had his guns on and his hands wasn't up!"

"All right, I'll finish my say now," Dudley went on. "I was ready to make this fellow my prisoner, but Orson jumped back outside as this fellow shot at him with two guns. Then Orson spilled the truth, proving this boy has told me the truth. I knew Bull Orson was a snake, but you boys persuaded me, against my better judgment, to take him in. Now you know the truth, Sutcliffe, you and Jarrett and Tony Olla. Are you with me, or are you turning against me to believe that slimy, sidewinder who came here to kill me while claiming to be my friend?"

THERE was a murmuring of voices outside the south wall. Joe Raglin whispered to Dudley.

"Better watch the front door, Mr. Dudley," he said. "I'll watch where I come in, so's they can't rush us."

"We'll make you a proposition, Ace," Sutcliffe called then. "If you come out and let us take that Texas feller, we'll call it quits and everything'll be hunky-dory again. Orson's willin' to 'pologise and take back ever'thing he said."

"If Orson and his four men will leave here first and let you see 'em through the Chasm, I'll do it, Sutcliffe. I know now that this Texas cowboy has told me the truth. I won't trust Orson any more. He's got to leave here."

"Haw, haw, haw!" Orson's thick laugh roared on the night air. "Hear the ol' fool! You tell 'im, Tony, and you, Jarrett. Sutcliffe ain't got the nerve to break the ol' fool's heart! Tell 'im we're trailin' together from now on, and he's out. We're gonna have a real hideout, a big thing in here, Dudley, somethin' bigger'n you've got brains to handle, you poor ol' addleheaded, dehorned woman-hater!"

Joe Raglin had slipped noiselessly through the kitchen and placed himself beside the door where he had entered the house. There he stood waiting and watching, the door open just wide enough for him to see the moonlight on the ground outside. He could see the wall at the back and on the south side of the door, and the little house in which June Dell was a prisoner.

He suspected that while the conversation was continued from the front as a blind, some of the men would be trying to slip in this back door. As they seemed to be congregated on the south side, he believed they would come around

that south corner and along the wall he was watching. They therefore took him by sudden surprise, coming around the north corner.

Leaning against the north side of the door, watching the wall and moonlight out there, with only his right-hand gun in readiness, his first intimation of attack was when the door flew back suddenly and he realised more than one man was springing up the steps into the door.

His gun came up automatically as a tall, lanky form sprang up into the doorway, leaping for the darkness within, two feet ahead of another shoving figure. Joe's .38 spat a blast of flame into the face of the leaping first figure. That tall, gangling form flung itself backward, emitting a choking cry of sudden terror, staggering the man immediately behind, then slumped down over the steps.

Feet thumped rapidly on the ground, going back around the north corner of the house and a man was shouting lustily:

"Hey, look out! He's got Spurlock! He's killed Spurlock at the back door! Bull, he's done it—that Texas skunk's started it when we tried to go in the back door peaceable!"

The wild cry sped around the north side of the house and wound up in front.

"Got Spurlock?" Orson shouted his question. "The dirty, damn' double-dyed, murderin' polecat. Let's get 'em boys! Surround the house. Get some oil! Go fetch that lamp full of oil from the other house, Tony. We'll burn 'em out and pour 'em full o' lead!"

That ruthless order set something off in Joe Raglin. If this house burned June Dell's prison cabin, close by, would burn with it!

He ran back into the long front room.

"Mr. Dudley!" he cried in low anxious voice. "Where are you? Give me that key, quick—key to the little house out back!"

"What you want with it?" Dudley asked, a sullen anger in his tone. He was beside the front door.

"If they burn this house, it'll set the girl's cabin on fire!" Joe threw the warning at him. "Hurry! Give me the key! I'll get her out!"

"Let her burn!" Dudley snarled, not like the man Joe had measured him to be a short while before. "She had no business coming here."

Orson and others were making plenty of fuss outside, hiding themselves along the side walls of the house. Joe received the impression that someone was running toward the other big house. Going for that oil! A fury such as he had never felt came over him then in a sudden, overwhelming rush. This man, Ace Dudley, in his blind, unreasoning hatred of women for the wrong one alone had done to him, would let June Dell burn to death!

Joe did not hesitate in his next step when that fury swept him on the heels of that fearful realisation. A grey streak of light from the moon-bathed world outside came through the crack where the door was open an inch or two. Ace Dudley stood there with his face close to that streak of light, watching the outside, no doubt goaded by a fanatical desire for a shot at Bull Orson.

"Get back and watch the kitchen door," Dudley ordered without turning his face from that splinter of light.

IF he had turned his face and could have seen in the darkness, he would have at that instant seen the butt of Joe's gun splitting the air in an arc over his head.

With a dull thud the steel of that gun

crashed on the back of Ace Dudley's head. He staggered and would have fallen heavily, noisily on the floor, but Joe Raglin's arms were ready and caught the sagging form.

Dudley made no sound to indicate that he had even for a flicking instant felt the deadening blow. Joe laid him out easily on the floor and feverishly searched the man's pockets for any sign of keys.

He tore at Dudley's pockets, in pants, vest and double-pocketed shirt. He snatched a wallet from one of the bandit leader's hip pockets and emptied its contents hurriedly on the floor, but no tinkle of metal keys came forth.

That man would be on his way back with the oil now. If Dudley remained here by the door, unconscious, Orson might shove in the door and see him, perhaps shoot him to make sure he was dead, then come through the house at Joe. The youth jerked the limp form into a corner and left it there.

He turned then, guns in hand, and went as speedily and silently as he could back to the kitchen. He felt sure that none of the outlaws had dared approach that door again during his absence.

He put his face cautiously out far enough to see the corners of the house. A flash at the south corner burst blindingly before his eyes and a bullet singed his left ear, deafening him with the vicious concussion of air as it zipped by. A second later, recovering his vision after that blinding flash, he threw a shot at the corner and leaped out, following the bullet.

A gun crashed behind him from the north corner of the house and his hat flew off many feet in front of him. He dropped almost flat on the ground to put the high log steps between him and the enemy while he jerked himself hastily to the corner of the house on hands and knees.

A face, with a gun-filled hand before it, shoved up there in front of him and peered toward the kitchen door. With elbow resting on the ground, Joe's left-hand gun lifted and blasted the close target. He saw the man's face for an instant in the flash of his gun, wrenched with horror; saw him sprawl backward, falling to the ground, but he did not wait to see more.

Only seconds had elapsed since he had dodged lead from that other sniping gunman at the north corner. By this time that man would be coming toward those intervening steps. He wriggled around as a gun roared there just above the steps and he felt the suction of air as the bullet zipped past his head, missing him by the measure of the inch or two made in the instant by his sudden turn.

He shot at the ducking head and shoulders, but likewise missed because that dodging enemy had seen him and his lifting gun there in the moonlight. Joe sprang like a panther, on all-fours, for those steps, throwing himself in behind them, with their three feet of log wood separating him from the man who wanted to kill him.

The logs of which the steps had been made were roughly hewn only on top to make the steps. Their under sides, where they were piled one on top of the other, were still rounded as they had grown. This left open spaces between them, from one end to the other. Joe was quick to perceive this while waiting to see if the other man would be the first to dare a shot over the top.

He held the muzzle of his left gun a few inches from one of the openings between the logs and fired.

The gunman at the other end of the steps rose up convulsively, stooping, hands clawing at his chest and fell out into the yard, gasping a stifled groan, his body crossing that of the still, long form of Spurlock where the latter had pitched himself in death out of the kitchen door.

Joe Raglin snapped his head back and forth, glancing warily at each corner of the house. He saw no sign of enemies at either place, but heard shouting voices toward the front of the house. A glance toward the little cabin, twenty feet away, where June Dell must now be stifling her fears and listening to the battle, showed

Joe that if he could keep the sniping gunmen away from the corners of the house long enough, he could have a try at shooting off that lock. The cabin was almost directly behind the big house.

He arose and flattened himself against the wall at the corner. A searching glance from one eye, peering down the logs toward the front of the house, disclosed two heads, one below the other, partly exposed at the front corner. To scare them more than with any hope of a hit, he threw a shot in their direction, then sped around to the north corner of the house.

Two men were rushing at full speed toward him, obviously taking advantage of his known presence at the south corner to advance upon him. Their gaze was fixed on that north corner as they rushed for it and the instant Joe bent out beyond it to explore, the two runners turned, yelling in terror, to run back.

HE fired twice at them. Both of the frenzied racers threw themselves in behind the front corner like a baseball player sliding to home base, one tumbling over the other in the hasty scramble for safety. Joe could not be sure if he had hit either of them and did not take time to think about it, for he had to get back to the south side. From there he saw no enemies in front, but heard their voices. How long before they would surmise that Ace Dudley was out of the fight and that they could come at him through the house, Joe could not guess, but he knew that they would do that soon.

While he had them bluffed temporarily, he ran to the cabin and called to June Dell.

"June!" he whispered loudly at the door. "Are you in there?"

"Yes, Joe," she cried, low and frantic, just beyond the planks of the door. "I knew it was you! Oh, Joe, I want to get out to help you! They have me locked in!"

While she spoke he was examining the lock. The latter was an old-fashioned padlock, fastened through strong staples fixed in the door-facing and in the forward door puncheon.

"Stand back, June!" he commanded hastily. "I'm gonna shoot this lock off. Stand back in the corner!"

"All right," he heard her voice from farther away.

He flattened himself around the door-facing against the logs and held the muzzle of his gun close to the lock. With only his hand exposed to the danger of glancing bullet or flying metal pieces, he backed the hammer and let go.

There was a loud screech and jerk of rattling lock as the bullet smashed and glanced off the rusty metal. Feverishly he seized the lock and twisted at it violently. It still held, though it had been dented and warped by the bullet.

Aiming the muzzle of the gun now so the bullet would strike just over the place where the catch bar should be inside the old lock, he fired again and once more there was the screech and howl of lead on metal. Something dropped on the ground at his feet, and he saw, with a mighty rush of joy, that it was the lock.

Gun still in hand, he shoved hard on the door and it flew open. June Dell rushed into his arms as he stepped quickly upon the threshold. She was bareheaded, but wore a black coat over her dress.

"Steady, sweetheart!" he cautioned, turning, right arm around her, to peer out at the big house. "Quiet!"

He listened for sounds while June Dell clung to him with bated breath. He heard his enemies arguing, still at the front of the house, held in check by the deadly havoc his guns had wrought upon their comrades.

"Who the devil's he shootin' at, Bull?" one man was asking fearfully. "Cain't you see nothin'?"

"He's just shootin' to skeer us off," another suggested. "Le's spread out and take 'im from both sides. If we run——"

"Shut up and come on!" Bull Orson's voice shouted. "The stinkin' skunk's shootin' off that lock on the gal's hut. That's what he's doin'! Spread out to them trees! Don't let 'em get to the bushes!"

"We gotta run like lightning, June," Joe spoke and seized the girl's hand, pulling

her out into the moonlight. "Hurry! At the back of the cabin—then straight out back—keep the cabin between us and them!"

He was jerking her in a swinging circuit of the cabin corner as he spoke. Her coat and skirt impeded her. She caught them up with both hands and ran with Joe, increasing their speed markedly.

They had covered a hundred yards and had passed two trees that stood out alone upon the clearing, but the line of forest was still more than fifty yards away when their enemies spied them.

"There they go!" Orson roared. "Let 'em have it!"

Guns, several of them, roared in rapid staccato. Bullets sung past the heads of the fleeing lovers. One ploughed the ground in front of them, looking like a swift snake speeding over the soil in a straight line.

Joe shoved June in front of him as they sped onward. Bullets ran after them to the edge of the forest.

He heard Orson shouting something about getting to the corral for horses. As he and June fell in behind the first trees, he heard more distinctly the directions Orson was howling at his men.

"On your horses," he bellowed, "and run to the Chasm mouth quick. Cut 'em off! They'll ride his horse and git away sure if we don't beat 'im to the Chasm!"

Joe saw two of them running for the corral then and knew that if he would get June Dell to safety he must do it very quickly.

CHAPTER XII

JOE urged June Dell to run with him and headed out through the tangle of undergrowth there beneath the high trees. Branches switched their faces cruelly as they hurried along, reckless of the punishment they received.

After a hundred yards so so Joe stopped and whistled for Midnight, then called to him by name. Listening for a moment he heard nothing and hurried on, fearful that Midnight had wandered away, or possibly had been found by some of the outlaws.

They came out into a clear spot among the trees, where the moonlight made a little lake of silver glow on a quarter of an acre. Joe remembered that not far beyond this open patch of ground in the thick trees nearer the crater wall, he had left Midnight.

Grateful for this temporary relief from the tormenting obstruction of the undergrowth and tree limbs, they ran out into the moonlight. The youth believed all his surviving enemies were gone after their horses. He was rudely corrected on this point.

June Dell was out of breath from so much running in this high mountain air to which she was not accustomed. Joe was helping her to run on across the treeless little area where only a few large rocks broke the smooth, grassy terrain. A loud outcry behind them, near the western edge of the clear patch, shocked them into a new burst of speed.

"There they go, 'crost that open ground!" a man shouted. "Ain't got to his horse yet, Bull. We'll git 'em!"

"Take a crack at 'em while I——" Bull Orson's voice was lost in the roar of a gun and the vicious "Zeeoonh!" of the bullet's quick passage dangerously close to the runners' heads.

Two more shots followed quickly. The zipping bullets may have been several feet away in their biting song, but they sounded as if they fanned Joe's and June's ears. Joe pulled the girl down behind a broad rock that stood waist high and jerked a gun to return the fire, while June caught her breath. It was twenty steps yet to the edge of the timber.

The gun snapped. It was fired out. He hastily threw out the empty shells and stuck in six new cartridges with expert, hurrying fingers. The man hidden across the clearing fired again and the bullet zoomed off the side of the rock with an ugly whine. Joe sent two bullets rapidly in answer to where he saw the flash of a gun over there in the line of bushes.

Remembering then the partly heard

directions Orson had given that hidden sniper, Joe suspected that the bearded outlaw would be at that moment running around the clearing to cut them off.

"Run for the woods, June," he ordered, "while I keep that feller dodging! Run straight out behind this rock to that big tree yonder. Hurry!"

The girl, arose, stooping, and ran obediently. Joe snatched his second gun and poured a barrage of shots from both guns at the hidden gunner. Not a shot came in answer while June Dell covered the distance between the rock and the timber shadows. Joe followed her progress with glances over his shoulder. When she darted in behind that big tree he holstered his guns and followed her.

No more shooting from that other side bothered him as he ran. He was wondering if the fellow was following Orson in the effort to head off him and June, when a loud, wailing cry told him the truth.

"Hey, Bull! Fer God's sake come here! I'm bad hit—cain't stop the bleedin'! I'm dyin'. Bull—please—come——"

The anguished wail weakened until Joe, hurrying June Dell on into the forest, could hear no more. He heard no reply from Orson to that terrified appeal for aid.

Joe Raglin knew that his most hated enemy was at that moment stalking him and June, and not far away among those screening tree shadows. It was a temptation hard to resist to hide the girl and go stalking for the man he most wanted to kill, but he remembered the Chasm and how impossible it would be for them to reach the safety he wanted for June Dell if those men who went for horses should head them off from that Chasm mouth. They could keep them in the crater indefinitely, or until a final attack from ambush ended their slow starvation. Not even the prospect of quickly achieving his mad determination to kill Bull Orson for the murder of his brother could blind him to the fact that beside him now was one he loved even more than he hated Bull Orson; one whose life and happiness he must assure, though it mean a long postponement of his vengeance.

A low whucker of a horse greeted him as he ran on to the spot where he had left Midnight. The great black gelding stood in the open above the line of forest at the edge of the ring of jumbled rocks under the high crater wall. He had evidently wandered there, grazing. The bridle reins, which Joe had left dangling to the ground so the horse would not move far from where he left him, had caught over a heavy rock. Midnight stood thus hitched, and pawed the ground impatiently as Joe and the girl ran to him.

Within a few seconds the youth had mounted and lifted June Dell up behind him. He was considering which way to go in order to reach the trail going to the Chasm, when the matter was decided for him. From a considerable distance down through the timber a gun bellowed once, twice, and the third time in quick succession, the bullets splashing through tree limbs, ricochetting with a terrifying sound like maddened bumblebees.

At the first shot Midnight jumped and elected his own course along the fairly open, clear ground between the line of rocks and the trees below. Joe touched his flanks with the spurs lightly and let the sure-footed racer go at full speed. The going was rough and Midnight had to jump rocks here and there. Joe was fearful that the brave animal might stumble on a grass-hidden stone and throw them all in a heap among those dangerous, scattered rocks.

WHEN he was sure that they had gone far enough along the edge of the trees to put plenty of distance between them and the sniper from the woods, he turned the horse directly into the forest and headed for the trail. He feared that already those other outlaws had got on their horses and were riding now for the Chasm mouth.

Ducking limbs of trees and bush tops,

he and June held on while he urged Midnight down the slope, picking his way the best he could in the spots of moonlight coming through the tree-tops. Bull Orson, a long distance off now, and apparently running the other way, was yelling to his companions. Joe Raglin, ducking and intently watching the way ahead, could not take time to make sure of what the outlaw was shouting.

"He's telling the others that we're riding for the Chasm," June told Joe over his shoulder, holding tightly to him. "Now he's telling them to hurry and head us off."

"They've 'bout had time enough to do that, too, I'm afraid," the worried youth told her. "I sure wanta get you out first, June, 'fore I finish with that devil, Orson."

"If that's what you intend doing, Joe Raglin," she declared with impetuous spirit, "stop right now. I'm not going out of this awful place without you!"

"Y u'll go out," he answered grimly, "if I have to pull you out by that pretty lariat of hair on that hard little head o' yours. You hadn't orta come in here."

"Hush! Listen!" she cried and squeezed his waist. "I hear horses running. Hurry Joe! They're getting ahead of us!"

He heard the rapid beat of hoofs then off to their right, two or three hundred yards. That would be on the trail before the houses. Joe knew the trail wound through the forest not far ahead of him. He risked a faster gait and spurred Midnight, speaking to the black, urging him. Both young people were hatless, Joe having left his hat in his hurry where a bullet had knocked it off back of Ace Dudley's house. The limbs of trees scratched their ducking faces fearfully now, but the young Texan had no mercy on them or the horse. He made the latter run, warning June to lay low with him over the saddle.

The clatter of hoofs came nearer and seemed converging upon them. Then Joe saw a man and horse shoot by an opening in the trees fifty yards off to his right. He spurred Midnight again and they leaped forward as Joe pulled gun with right hand. He must stop that rider.

The horseman rushing along the trail shot across an open patch of moonlight just ahead. Joe jerked up his gun and fired at the flitting phantom figure. A second later Midnight bounded out upon the trail and turned, without prompting from Joe, into hot pursuit of that horse and rider thirty or forty yards away. The man ahead recognised his pursuers and fired at them as he raced onward, but the fast pace of his horse made his bullet go wild.

Joe, leaning forward and standing in his stirrups to steady his aim was about to fire at the speeding horseman again when June cried a warning.

"There's another one coming behind us, Joe!" she told him. "He just shot at us!"

"Lay low and hold tight," he commanded. "That feller ahead is our biggest worry right now. We gotta stop him. There's a bend just ahead."

They swept around the bend as the man behind fired twice more in futile effort to stop them before they passed from view. The trail bent again immediately and they saw the man ahead, saw that they were gaining on him. Midnight was stretching his long legs into the speed which his thoroughbred appearance had promised. This was the hardest test ever given him and the Texan felt like crying out for joy as the noble horse cut down the distance between them and the man they followed.

In a spot of moonlight that rider could be seen frantically and cruelly kicking his spurs into the labouring pony's flanks, trying desperately to make him outrun the speeding horse that was so plainly overtaking him.

Twenty-five yards separated the racing horses, then it was twenty yards. Midnight's head and neck were stretched out straight. He ran as if one light jockey were on him instead of two grown people.

The wall of the crater, looming hundreds of feet into the grey night sky there very close before them, warned that the

Chasm entrance was not far away. Joe Raglin was on edge with desperation. If that man reached the protection of the Chasm mouth, they could never get out of this walled-in little crater world.

He had wanted to get close enough to shoot the man out of his saddle, for it was extremely repugnant to him to shoot a horse. Only as a last resort would he shoot at the innocent pony to stop the man.

Scarcely fifteen yards intervened now between the two speeding horses. June Dell cried that the man behind was again in view. Over the clatter of horse hoofs they heard the sound of the man's gun, but if bullets came near, they could not hear them.

AT twelve yards distance the man leading the race, coming to the foot of the slope leading up to Midnight Chasm, turned in his leaning position and started to lift his gun back to fire at Joe and June. He had to half straighten himself in the saddle to make the shot.

In south Texas Joe Raglin had practised hundreds of times shooting from a running horse. He had mastered the trick of planting his shot in the instant when his horse was springing from rear to fore feet, aiming and firing in that bare second before the jolt of landing fore feet. He snapped his gun up now and fired when he saw the other man's manœuvre to shoot at him.

The forward rider dropped his gun, sagged on his saddle horn, wavered to the left and slowly fell, headlong, to the ground as his horse ran on.

The other rider, pursuing the youthful pair on the great black, was still throwing shot after shot toward them, although he had been left a hundred yards behind. One of his bullets whined off of a rock at the left when Midnight was sweeping up past the line of rocks piled against the mountain-wall.

Blowing hard as he achieved the final rise of ground before the Chasm mouth, Midnight shot into the dark crack as if he was as anxious as his riders to reach its protection. At the first bend, a few short jumps beyond the entrance, Joe stopped the horse and swung a leg over the saddle horn, dropping to the ground. He fumbled in a pocket, took out his match-box and put it into June Dell's hand as he helped her into the saddle, speaking rapidly as he did so.

"Here—take this box of matches—let Midnight lead you on to that gate 'crost the trail. Get down on your right side and strike matches to see how to open that pole gate. Get on to the outside—I'll meet you there. Hurry!"

He never waited to see if she would obey him. He didn't have time to. That other rider was racing for the mouth of the Chasm at that moment.

He ran out into the moonlight and leaped up among the big rocks at the right. The pursuer saw him run out and must have instantly realised that he could not ride unscathed past that deadly young gun-slinger. He jumped from the saddle while his horse was still running, then bounced up among the rocks on the same side of the trail about thirty steps over the jagged boulders below Joe.

The pale grey light of dawn was reaching up over the east mountain cap. The half moon, directly overhead, lighted the rocks there below so that Joe saw clearly where the man slid in out of sight among those tumbled boulders.

Evolving quick strategy on the spur of the moment, Joe slid down and ran half the distance to the man, going close to the heaped up rocks, running on his toes, noiselessly. There he fell in among the screening lava blocks and lay listening.

He listened for sound of the man among the rocks, who he surmised would be creeping upon his supposed position higher up. He heard something else which both worried and made him glad. Another rider was coming along that trail through the forest. It must surely be Bull Orson. It would double Joe's jeopardy in

this creeping fight if Orson added himself to that hidden enemy below, but it was good to know that he could soon be swapping lead with Tom's murderer.

He could not hear any sound of the hidden man. When he thought the fellow would be crawling up among those rocks he did not come. It soon became apparent why he was not advancing. Bull Orson came into view down the trail a hundred yards away.

"Stop, Bull!" the man shouted from the rocks near where he had fallen in. Orson drew rein suddenly and the man continued: "Look out—don't come any closer on that horse! That Texas feller's hid right 'bove here in the rocks. He'll git you. Pile off an' slip 'round on the west side o' this trail. Get through the woods."

Orson didn't answer, but kicked his horse violently, jumping him quickly into the timber below the trail.

While the man was speaking below him, Joe Raglin slipped over and among the rocks, getting nearer the fellow. He had to move his feet slowly and carefully to keep his spurs from jingling. For the most part he crawled on his stomach when the flatness of the rocks permitted. Every few feet he stopped to listen. It was a good guess that the man would be listening for him, but waiting for Orson to get into position. Obviously the strategy to be used against him was to get him between a cross-fire and cut him off from the Chasm.

Joe's impatience to have a task done with as quickly as possible was driving him on now. He had figured just where the man would be hiding and as he drew nearer the spot he picked out the two big slabs of stone, leaning against each other as in grotesque embrace, behind which his enemy should be crouched.

Suddenly, with almost paralysing surprise, a dark form leaped up at the left of the wide, flat stone over which he was crawling by slow inches. The moonlight glinted on the metal of a gun as it was shoved over at him. Automatically, with lightning reaction, his left hand swept up over the surface of the rock and struck at that gun.

THE gun exploded close to his face, blinding him for a second as he jerked around to bring his right-hand gun into action. The man's first shot had been deflected by that quick sweep of Joe's left hand. By the time the youth was ready to fire, the gunman under the rock swung his muzzle back to bear upon Joe's chest.

Joe kicked at the uplifted gun and fired point-blank into the man's face as the two flames of guns met and merged as one streak of fire. He saw the man slump down between the rocks, heard his gun clink upon those rocks, but for a few seconds he sat there dazed and numb.

His left side felt as if it had gone to sleep, was paralysed. He lifted his left arm and a dead, sickening pain wrenched at his shoulder. The bullet had done serious damage, but he was satisfied that he could still lift that arm. Blood flowed warmly down his left side. Then, as if the flow of blood relieved him, he began to feel less deadened in his senses. His memory was clearing again. He looked down and saw his late would-be killer, bullet-blasted face turned up to the moon, and then remembered Bull Orson.

He first glanced toward the pile of rocks west of the trail as he climbed weakly over the crooked stones under him, his left hand still numb, scarcely feeling the rocks it touched. His eyes roved on toward the timber and what he saw brought full clarity to his brain again with a rush.

A big, burly figure was hurrying beneath the trees in a laboured run up the slope. Joe did not want Bull Orson to reach those screening rocks. He lifted his gun and fired; saw Orson jump behind a tree. He then slid off the last big rock into the edge of the trail. Orson fired at him from his tree shield. The bullet howled off the stone behind him. The menace gave him back his strength.

Running and dodging, he bounded

along to the bend of the trail and into the woods but a short distance from the tree hiding the black-bearded killer. The exertion made his shoulder wound bleed more freely. The clothing of his whole left side was warmly wet, sticking to his skin. When he staggered in behind a tree, Orson leaped from his tree and ran to another deeper in the forest. Joe saw him a second before Orson flung himself out of sight and threw a hasty shot at him.

His debtor was running out on him, cheating him of his pay! The cowardice of Bull Orson could still beat him. He tried to run to the tree Orson had just deserted and realised that his legs were weak, that he merely staggered. A gun exploded there ahead of him and something hit him a stunning blow, seeming to tear a rib out of his right side.

He leaned against the tree to which he came in the shadows. The early morning light was blending with the paling light of the moon. A voice was snarling a challenge. It was Bull Orson's voice. He remembered it in his hatred that led him on.

"You will follow me, will you?" Orson was boasting. "Come on, you damn' Texas tick! I've got the bullet in this gun right now that's gonna send you knockin' on the doors o' hell! Come on!"

"I'm coming, Orson," Joe told him, his voice very low and under smooth control, though his head was light and the ground seemed to be in the way of his dragging feet. "You won't get out from behind that tree and fight like a man, 'cause you ain't a man, but I'll blast you out! Damn you to hell, you stinkin' swine of a coward I'm coming after you, Orson!"

His right hand was strong; the gun in it was light as a feather; his every faculty was concentrated on moving that hand and gun in unison with the command of eye and brain. Eyes watched the tree as he advanced on it, watching for the first moving fraction of Orson's body that would come into sight if the cowering killer tried to throw a shot around at him.

Then he saw just the gun and hand of Orson sneak around the side of the tree. Orson had waited until Joe was close enough for an unaimed shot. He would not risk his precious body. Joe's gun snapped upward, roared its thunder. Orson's gun and hand disappeared and the howling outlaw jumped out into sight for a moment in his terror, squeezing his right hand. Then he threw himself back behind the tree.

"You've got my hand, Raglin, you've winged me—I'm helpless!" he wailed loudly. "I give up! You cain't kill a helpless man!"

"I will if you don't fight it out, you sneaking, yeller murderer!" Joe told him. "But I'll still give you the chance you didn't give my brother. Pick up your gun with your left hand and start shootin'. It's your last chance!"

HE was four or five feet from the fearful man he had ridden nearly a thousand miles to kill. The grey light was coming a little more helpfully among the trees. Joe saw the moment of hesitation. Then, as Orson bent down, pretending to go for his gun with left hand, the youth saw the ponderous body tense for the spring.

Orson couldn't fight fair, even when he was given more than a fair advantage. This Joe knew as he saw the treacherous outlaw leap at him, hand sweeping over and down to knock the gun out of his hand.

The youth's finger pressed the trigger twice, releasing two bullets into the big killer's chest. A look of amazement overcame Orson's bearded features, and he fell to the ground.

Calmly, Joe holstered his .38.

"I got him for you, Tom," he murmured as he turned away from the dead killer.

Joe Raglin, feeling much better, but strangely weak and sleepy, walked out of the forest into the clearer light of the coming day.

A small form, in black cloak, with bare head of raven hair, glossy in the dawning light, ran toward him from the Chasm mouth.

"Joe! Joe!" June Dell cried, a high tremor in her voice. "Are you all right, Joe? Speak to me, darling!"

He felt her small arms around him, heard her voice as if it was coming from far away, then he folded up and went to sleep as he had wanted to for a long time.

WHEN Joe awoke it was dark, but a light flickered on a rough hewn ceiling overhead. For a long time he lay watching the funny jumping shadows on the ceiling and walls, turning his head weakly, his mind gradually clearing. He tried to move. His left shoulder pained him agonisingly and his right side ached.

He lifted his head and saw two people sitting before a fireplace in which a log fire burned. To his astonished eyes and reviving memory came recognition of Ace Dudley and June Dell as they sat there, backs to him, talking low. Slowly came memory of everything that had happened and a guess as to what transpired after he lost consciousness. He felt thirsty.

"You might give a feller a big drink o' water," he complained.

June Dell jumped from her chair as if shot, and sped on light feet to his bedside.

"Oh, Joe, darling!" she cried, hovering over him, a hand pressing his cheek. "How long have you been awake You're all right? You feel all right?"

"Give me time to answer one at a time," he begged, "but first give me some water. I'm dry as a west Texas steer after a three-year drouth."

She brought him a big dipper full of water that cooled and refreshed him wonderfully, and then told him many things in answer to his questions; first, about how Ace Dudley, revived and wondering what sort of hurricane had hit his place, killing all his men, had come to the Chasm mouth in time to help bring Joe to the house. Dudley, who had once been a student of medicine and surgery, had given expert help in dressing Joe's wounds, after which Joe had passed from delirium into slumber and had slept all day until this evening hour.

Then Joe remembered that the nightmare of having to hunt down and kill a man no longer hung over him. He looked up into the grey face of Ace Dudley, grinning as he thought of the blow he had delivered to the old man's head.

"I see you're breaking your promise and talking to a woman at last, Ace Dudley?" he jibed, but with his inoffensive smile. "What miracle brought that about?"

"Well," Dudley said, a bit embarrassed, but smiling the first smile that Joe had seen on his face, that had been so stern in his only meeting with him before, "you see, Raglin, I've been an awful fool for near thirty years, thinking the woman I loved told the story that sent me, an innocent man, to prison. I escaped from that prison and never knew it was she who later got proof of my innocence.

"She married afterwards, but she never gave up trying to find me and let me know I was clear. Less than a year ago she found out in some way that I was an owl-hooter away out West here. She had become the mother of this wonderful girl here, but had no boys. June Dell heard the story and, like the spunky, wonderful girl she is, she came out west to my brother, known as Buck Fain, in Angelita, and waited for me. That's about all the story, except that I'll be going back, I guess; back to the good life. No more Midnight Chasm and this lonely crater place for me."

"Congratulations, Ace Dudley that was, whatever your real name is," Joe said, and

held out his hand from the bed covers. "I'm sure you deserve the better life. If you had been the killer kind, you wouldn't be helping us."

"How did you know that isn't my real name?" Dudley asked.

"I'm sorry to bring you bad news right at this happy time, Mr. Dudley," Joe said, "but you'd as well learn it now as a few days later."

He told Dudley and June Dell of Buck Fain's death and the discovery of the hidden treasure box and the simply written will which gave Buck Fain's property to this man, his brother.

The news seemed to stun Ace Dudley and make him sad and morose again.

"Poor old Buck," he finally said after moments of silence, when Joe had finished his story. "He came out to this country in the first place to try and get me to quit the life I was leading. He knew that I had been cleared back home, but did not know that the woman I thought had sent me to prison was mainly the cause of clearing me. I was too eaten up with bitterness to go back. I thought I was in too deep. He never quit trying. Now he has to die just when things are so much brighter."

HE arose and went out into the night, a sad, pitiful old man. June Dell watched him go out, then turned tear-filled eyes to Joe Raglin.

"He's such a strange, wonderful man, Joe," she murmured, leaning her face down close to his as she fought her tears.

"And you're the most wonderful, most beautiful woman in the world, June Dell. I must go back and take charge of brother Tom's ranch in Plentiful Valley. Are you going to like ranching in that beautiful country,"

"If there are never any more Bull Orsons and Midnight Chasms down there, I guess I can get along, if you'll take an ex-dance-hall singer," she said softly, smiling through her drying tears.

"Kiss me, Mrs. Joe Raglin that's-gonna-be," he said, and with one good arm pulled her down to kiss her red, warm lips.

GUNS ALONG THE CIMARRON

By DENVER BARDWELL

CHAPTER I

A LONE rider passed along the edging of timber on the south bank of the Cimarron while a tempestuous night rushed upon him. His thin lips were tightened in a habitual straight line as he watched black storm clouds bulge up across the western sky.

Far out upon the plain frightened antelopes ran like flitting sprites in search of haven against the menacing holocaust. Prairie dogs ceased their quarrelsome barking at the thunder and lightning, cocked heads for one last uneasy survey of the swirling grey-bottomed clouds, then scuttled out of sight below their mud-domed housetops.

The lone rider wore two guns. The holsters had rubbed white spots on the brown corduroy pants legs. A scabbarded Winchester hung under the man's right leg. A worn black Stetson was on his head, covering straight blond hair. A red neckerchief, black-and-white striped shirt, brown leather gauntlets and scalloped top cowboy boots, that had long ago lost their shiny newness, completed his wardrobe. A "mackintosh" raincoat was rolled and tied above his dufflebags behind the saddle cantle.

His blue eyes gave no more than a hint of his character. Perhaps they could be friendly and smiling on occasion, but in them now was a dark alertness. He had searched for sign, scouted out and watched isolated habitations of men over hundreds of square miles of the northern and western stretches of Indian Territory. At last he found subtle markings on the prairie and along the Cimarron's banks, almost obliterated by rain. Only to-day he had

found the house and corrals, full of bawling, hungry cattle, hidden within the heavy timber across the river.

At the edge of the widened part of the river he halted his tired mustang and studied the sand banks between him and the northern shore line. Night was coming on, hastened by the heavy clouds filling all of the western sky. Within a few hours the black storm which roared up now across the sky would have those ridges and rippled sand beds deeply covered with flood waters. After a few moments of studying the apparently innocent, dry-topped sands he turned his pony and went on up-stream.

"No chance for you and me there, pardner," he told his plodding bay pony. "We'd sink out of sight in them quicksands mighty fast."

The thunder climbed up until it was almost overhead and big rain drops, advance notice of the outpouring soon to come, splashed into the rider's face before he finally located a suitable crossing of deep water. He was about to guide the mustang into the water when he drew up on the reins. The animal under him appeared glad to postpone the plunge, drooping his head to rest during the halt.

" 'Twon't do, pardner, for us to keep this any longer," the blond cowboy spoke again in his confidential manner to the pony. "We better just commit to memory what we oughta, then tear it up."

He took a letter from inside his shirt. The envelope was worn and soiled from long handling and carriage in battered pockets. The name and address, "Captain Jack Hubert, Company B, State Rangers, Presidio, Texas," was almost illegible. The folded sheets were extracted from the envelope. While the storm roared and blasted across the sky, growling its threats to every living creature in its path, the sandy-haired rider carefully read the letter twice, re-reading parts several times. It was from the office of "Colonel Commanding, State Ranger Headquarters, Austin, Texas," and said:

Dear Captain,

For a long time the trail herds of Texas cattle being driven to the rail-heads in Kansas have been preyed upon by a powerfully organised rustler outfit just south of the Kansas line in the Territory strip. All efforts of the individual, or combined ranchers, whose trail herds have suffered, to track the rustlers and recover their stolen beef have been unsuccessful.

The method of the rustlers seems to be to attack trail crews with overwhelming forces, either kill the herd drivers, or disarm and unhorse them, leaving them afoot, far from help, and then drive away the herds. By the time pursuit is organised, it generally being the rainy season of late summer and early fall up there, the tracks of the stolen herds are washed out.

The Texas ranchers who have suffered repeated losses have sent some of their own men into the Territory to scout out and discover the outlaws. None of those scouts have returned to report. Undoubtedly they have been recognised and murdered. The newly organised Texas Cattlemen's Association has appealed to us for aid.

Since the section where the rustling occurs is outside of our jurisdiction we have been unable thus far to see how our forces could co-operate. Now, however, the matter has become so serious that I have decided upon an unusual and somewhat irregular procedure.

You have a man in your Company who has repeatedly distinguished himself in work against the constant rustler gangs along the Border, a man who was for several years a cowpuncher and once bossed a trail herd to Ft. Dodge. He should know something of the Territory and the section in which he must operate. I refer to Private Oren Barrett.

You will deliver to Private Barrett the accompanying poster, which has been torn in such a way to make it appear as if ripped off of a post or bulletin board. It bears Private Barrett's picture, a fictitious list of crimes, from bank robbery to murder, committed by him, and a descrip-

tion of him, along with an offer of five thousand dollars reward for him, dead or alive.

He will preserve, in a secure place on his person, or in his riding bags, this poster, as if because of his criminal vanity at such notoriety. We have sent a hundred of these same posters to be placed in conspicuous places about Ft. Dodge and other points in southern Kansas where the objects of our investigation should see them. However, Barrett must keep his copy of the poster until he worms his way into the rustler gang, either let it be found as if accidentally by the rustlers, or show it boastfully to them. We rely upon that method for Barrett to win the confidence of the gang, work with them until he knows their whole layout, headquarters, methods of hiding their trail and manner of disposing of the stolen beef.

Because he will be working outside our jurisdiction, he cannot act officially. He is merely loaned to the Association and will work as a private individual, his salary being paid by the Association while on this leave of absence. He is to be severely instructed to run no personal risks unnecessarily. His whole duty will have been completed when he acquires the needed information as outlined above.

When that purpose is accomplished, Private Barrett is to slip quietly away from the rustler gang, report his information to Jim Barstow, cattle buyer in Ft. Dodge, who has been appointed Kansas representative of the Texas Cattlemen's Association. Immediately after that is done, he will return to his Company and regular duties on the Border."

Captain Hubert had strictly enjoined Private Oren Barrett to destroy that dangerous letter before he reached enemy country. Since locating that house and the unusually large corrals, filled with bawling Texas longhorns here in the heart of Indian Territory where cattle ranchers were not supposed to run grazing herds, it was time to obey orders. Slowly, methodically, he tore the envelope and letter into fine pieces and threw them upon the sluggishly moving water of the Cimarron at his pony's feet.

The first real downpour of rain spattered upon the river's surface, whispered loudly among the leafy branches of the trees behind Oren Barrett. He untied the mackintosh and put it on, placed saddlebags and blanket roll upon his shoulders, then urged his pony into the water. The animal went reluctantly, but without attempting to turn aside. In the middle of the current he was compelled to swim, going completely under water except for head and neck. His rider's body was clear of the water from hips upward.

A few minutes later, within sight of the big, rambling log house and the extensive pole corrals beyond, Oren Barrett seemed to have lost his alert wakefulness. Apparently asleep in the saddle, he wavered in his slouching posture, head and shoulders drooping. His pony, heartened by the appearance of human habitation and the smell of other horses, needed no guiding hand on the reins.

While the hopeful mustang walked briskly on toward the front of the house, Barrett, although wavering as if asleep, kept his eyes busy observing from under the brim of his rain-soaked hat the lay of things ahead. His blood ran tingling through his body when he came close enough to see between the trees and through the pouring rain. A large number of men were gathered at the cow corrals. Most of them were under a wide shed beside one angle of the corral. In spite of the raging storm, the downpour of rain and gathering dusk of evening, those men were still busy wielding branding-irons.

Bawling, maddened longhorns were turned loose down one runway from the wide shed where the branding-fire was going, while riders out in the drenching rain forced other cattle into the branding-chute. No loss of roping and throwing animals here, proof that it was a wholesale proposition. A fear-crazed longhorn, slashing at the narrowing walls of poles in the chute with its long, keen-pointed horns, was finally pinned in the narrow section with poles shoved through

under its belly, above and below its neck and jammed against its hockers, holding it helpless for the work of the sizzling, painful hot iron. In spite of the drenching rain, Barrett could smell the stink of burned hair and hide, proof that hundreds of cattle had already been branded.

"Their sure 'nough headquarters!" he murmured to himself. "The place where they vent brands on all the thousands of critters they steal 'fore they move 'em on north-east. Somebody's herd is just been rustled 'long the Chisholm and drove down here. Wonder what happened to the fellers with the herd?"

CHAPTER II

Barrett gently brought his pony to a stop close to the front door of the double-winged, big house, halting under the branches of a large cottonwood tree. He thought some of those at the corrals a hundred and fifty yards away would see him, or somebody inside the house would come out with a challenge.

But the storm and the pressing business of using up the last minutes of fading daylight at the corrals caused those outside to give him no notice. Or they thought he was one of their own riders coming in. While he leaned far over as if about to fall from his saddle, simulating sleep, someone opened the door and hurried out to him. Through slitted eyes, glancing from under his hat, he saw the skirts of a woman under the piece of wagon sheet draped over her head and body. The rain crashed down blindingly.

"Johnny!" a girl's clear voice cried in alarm. "What's happened? Are you hurt?"

A woman here, and a young one at that! The unexpectedness of the discovery shocked Oren Barrett. Even if he had not been simulating sleepy stupor, he could not have immediately replied to the girl's frightened questions. She came very close and could now see him through the lessened barrier of rain. He wavered and leaned close to her upturned face, saw frightened eyes that stared widely at him.

"Oh!" she screamed low, as if the breath was going suddenly from her.

Barrett half-opened his eyes, partly straightened himself, afraid that the young woman would run back into the house, or scream more loudly to the men at the corrals. He lifted a hand gropingly to his hat in a weak gesture of tipping it to her and said:

"Howdy, miss. I'm dead for sleep—not slept none for days." He looked about slowly like a man drunk, or still half asleep. The girl watched him curiously as the rain beat upon her. "Guess my bronc brung me in here. Didn't know white people lived anywhere in this country. Maybe I'd better mosey on somewhere else." He reached for the reins he had dropped on the mustang's neck.

"Oh, no, no!" the girl cried and seized the right-hand rein. "You mustn't leave here now if you're a stranger. You're not working for Tyban and Honing, are you?"

A loud blast of thunder roared overhead, muffling her words. Barrett lifted left leg over the saddle-horn and dropped to the ground beside her.

"No, miss," he said, "I'm not working for nobody, but I'd sure like to get a job. Who's Tyban and Honing? They run this spread?"

"Yes—that is——" She hesitated and the look of fright came again into her eyes. "You better hitch your pony to that horseshoe rack in the side of the tree and come in the house."

He did as directed. The girl led him inside. She stood by the open door until he had stepped in, then glanced out toward the corrals. She shut the door quickly, threw off the dripping piece of wagon sheet and stared at Barrett in the murky light coming through two open windows there in front. Burning sticks of wood in a fireplace at the far end of the long room gave flickering aid to the fading daylight. He took off his raincoat.

"Two of them are coming!" she said with repressed excitement. "Jock Honing and Harry Tyban, the big bosses. I don't know who you are and there's no time to find out. If you're an honest man, you're in terrible danger here. Go to the fireplace, quick! You said you were dead for sleep. Sit down, or lie down by the fireplace. Make out that you're already asleep, but don't sleep! Listen to what I tell them, then you'll know what to say and do when they make you talk. Hurry!"

She had black, glossy hair combed straight back from a high forehead and plaited into a single thick strand that hung down over the back of her chequered calico dress. Her fair, oval face and her dark eyes, sparkling with fright, were very pretty, Barrett thought, and she was not over twenty years old. He hurried to obey her.

The wide, long room was enormous. A double row of bunks lined the walls. At each side of the fireplace, at the back end, doors connected this with other compartments. The door at the left was open and Barrett looked into a big kitchen-dining-room. A coloured boy was setting tin plates on the long table, while a large coloured man seemed busy at cooking operations before a big fireplace built into the centre of the far wall.

Barrett dropped into a home-made, hide-bottomed chair that sat in front of the fireplace. He spread his legs to the warmth of the flames as if intent on drying his wet pants. His rain-soaked Stetson was still on his head, tilted to cover his eyes. He felt for the folded poster in the breast pocket of his shirt, fixed it so the corner would protrude visibly, then let arms fall loosely, as if he were asleep. The girl was quietly waiting at the front door.

The men she had said were coming delayed their arrival. Through the drone of rain on the roof, Barrett heard the rumble of voices under the cottonwood tree in front. He surmised that his pony and trappings were being investigated. Then the voices grew more distinct, coming toward the door.

The door was shoved open roughly and a man spoke quietly to the girl.

"Lena, who's that Texan that rid in on that flea-bit skate out there? Uh-huh! Warming himself, huh?" He had evidently spied Barrett lying limply in the chair.

"Sh-h-h!" the girl hissed for quiet. "He was sound asleep on his pony as he rode up and stopped in front. I thought at first he was Brother Johnny come in from up-river. I got him half awake and he said he hadn't slept for days. He fell off his horse and stumbled in here and went to sleep there before the fire almost by the time he sat down. I believe he's some sort of outlaw running from the law and just too dead for sleep now to care whether he is caught or not."

"A very likely story! We'll damn' soon find out!"

Two pairs of heavy feet strode down the long length of the bunk-room with another lighter pair of shoes pattering along after them. Barrett kept his eyes closed lightly like a man in sound sleep and breathed regularly, heavily, his mouth slightly open. He could feel the near presence of one man as the latter stooped to spy under his hat-brim and look at his face, watch his eyes.

Suddenly his two guns were seized and jerked from the holsters. Barrett stirred lazily, lifted a hand to shove his hat back and looked up at the two men with eyes that were hazily half open. He blinked slowly with deceptive sleepiness, then moved to arise.

"Was sure sleepy—cain't keep my blinkers open," he said slowly. "I been——"

"Set down!" the man who stood before him rasped, and shoved him back into the chair. "How come you to blow in here, feller? Wake up and talk. Who sent you?"

Barrett looked up at the beefy, red-faced big man before him and glanced to the left at the tall, darkly handsome man who looked down at him silently with beaming, curious eyes. This man was dressed in city clothes that were new and well tailored.

"Nobody sent me," Barrett replied, rubbing at his eyes before he looked again at the men with less simulation of sleepiness. "I got tired of tearing my shanks on Texas cactus for twenty dollars a month and boiled beans. Rode north, heading for Kansas and Wyoming—anywhere to get a job riding for wages and good eats. You need a good puncher 'round here?"

"Never mind that," the man in front commanded sharply. "You ain't answered my question. How'd you come to drift in here? Who told you 'bout this place?"

"Nobody, pardner. When I lit out from Fort Worth, I headed straight for the north star. Rode all night, anyways, and most of the days. I saw your fire smoke this evening and got 'crost the river above the quicksands. Was so tired, went to sleep in the saddle. Woke up here—guess my bronc found the way in."

"What's that?" the beefy questioner reached out and snatched the poster from Barrett's left breast pocket.

"Hey, give me that!" Barrett cried, and grabbed the paper, tearing most of it from the man's hand.

He made an awkward attempt to throw what he had retrieved of the paper into the flames of the fireplace. A bony fist smashed against the side of his face, knocking him back against the tall city-dressed man. Four hands grasped him. The paper he had clenched in his right fist was pried from gripping fingers.

The red-faced, big man straightened out the crumpled paper and pieced it to the smaller fragment he had retained. He stooped to examine it by the light of the flames. The girl stood silently nearby, her hands clasping and unclasping nervously as she looked on.

"I'll be damned!" the reader of the poster finally exclaimed after several moments of laborious reading. He looked around at Barrett, studied his face a few seconds critically, glanced again at the picture on the poster. "It's him, all right, Harry. Luke Barnett, alias Oren Barrett, wanted in Texas for more murders and bank hold-ups than I thought had ever been pulled off in that whole State. Look!"

CHAPTER III

Barrett heard the girl behind him gasp and walk away.

"I don't wonder he was so plastered with want of shut-eye," the beefy man went on while the man he called Harry read the poster. "You had 'nough to run from not to sleep none this side of Canady, feller."

Barrett sat down in the chair and gestured resignedly with his hands. He said: "All right, you got me. I was sure a locoed fool to tear that off and keep it, but I never had no other picture of myself. Was gonna cut it out and send to my old lady over in east Texas, come Christmas. I wanta make a deal with you fellers."

"What sorta deal?"

"I promise not to make you no trouble if you promise to deliver me alive and collect your five thousand. There ain't a jail in Texas that can hold me. I'll get out, so I don't hafta stir up no trouble for you fellers and catch your lead. 'S 'at a deal?"

The red-faced big man, whom Barrett guessed was the Jock Honing of the pair the girl had named, began laughing hilariously and leaned against the mantel. Harry Tyban remained as silent as ever, still looking at the poster.

"Just take it easy, Luke," Honing advised jovially. "I seen that poster stuck up all over Dodge a week or so back. You go on up thataway and the other Luke—Luke Short—marshal up there, would sure take you in. We ain't lookin' for no blood money. We might even give you a job if you wanta hang 'round with us, eh, Harry?"

Handsome Harry Tyban looked up from the poster with a scowl and said: "Not so fast, Jock. You know the rules. When a man proves himself, he can join up. We'll give Barnett his chance soon. Until then he can do without his guns. Go lock them in the box and tell Nig to bring in his saddle pack and rifle and put his bronc in the corral. Make yourself at home, Barnett. Supper'll be ready soon. Lena!"

He turned to look at the girl who stood watching the gathering darkness through the open-shuttered left-hand window by the front door. She turned with a quick start and came toward the fireplace, down the long room. Barrett looked at her and saw her drying tears from her face with bare hands.

Tyban went into the room at the right of the fireplace and Lena followed him without a word. Jock Honing had gone into the kitchen and was speaking to the coloured boy, giving orders about Barrett's pack and horse. A rush of voices sounded outside as a large number of men came in toward the kitchen, running through the rain. Barrett heard them washing hands and faces on a gallery outside the kitchen-dining-room, talking loudly in rough banter. He turned his attention from them and listened for sounds from the room whence Lena had gone to Tyban's beckoning.

He heard the girl's voice raised in tearful protest against something, but there came only a faint murmur of Tyban's heavier voice. In about two minutes Tyban came out, his face dark with anger. Barrett stood with his back to the fire, drying his pants. Tyban scowled at him and said:

"Better go wash up, Barrett, and get ready for the chuck table if you want to eat 'fore that hungry bunch grabs it all."

He went on into the kitchen. Barrett said after him: "Sorta drying out yet. I'll be 'long. I'm more sleepy than hungry."

Lena came out, her face still more tearful and agitated than when she had entered the room. She started to pass Barrett and go on back to the front of the big bunk-room.

"Miss Lena!" Barrett whispered loudly, watching her.

She hesitated, then looked around at him. There was fear and dislike in her dark eyes.

"What's the trouble?" Barrett asked, still whispering. "Please trust me. I'd help you, even if they killed me for it."

She brightened for a flickering half-second, then caught herself back from coming toward him. As she turned on toward the front, she murmured barely loud enough for him to hear:

"You're a murderer—just another killer outlaw and rustler, like they're making of my brother. I hate every one of you!"

Suddenly Barrett realised what a fool he might be making of himself. He knew that the girl was genuinely bothered about something, but she had gone quite willingly to Tyban's call. What if she was acting a part? What if she was part of the "proving" to which Barrett, himself, must be submitted? It was not the most believable thing in the world, but his position was too dangerous to risk falling into a trap. He went into the big dining-room and on out upon the porch, where men were still washing faces and hands at a long shelf. Some of them were catching fresh pans of the rain water pouring from the low eaves of the porch.

There was a momentary hush near him as Barrett appeared on the nearly dark porch, then Jock Honing's voice boomed out an introduction.

"This is Luke Barnett, on the scout from Texas law, fellers! He'll get his initiation soon, then be one of the bunch. Treat 'im right!"

A pan was beaten in the dining-room; men rushed to the table with much noise of stamping feet and loud, bantering talk. Barrett followed the crowd and found himself a place, helped himself to steak, biscuits, corn bread, gravy, sorghum syrup and coffee. Lena did not eat with the mob of twenty or more men. Harry Tyban and Jock Honing took their places at the long

table and ate lustily with their men. Some of his nearest neighbours spoke to Barrett, seemed mildly curious, but restrained themselves from questions. He soon felt that his acceptance into the gang was at least half accomplished already. Only that "proving" of himself bothered him. He wondered what it would be, if he could go through with it.

Already he had secured most of the information he had been sent to get. He could learn from the railroad points in southern Kansas how the stolen cattle were marketed. At the first opportunity he meant to desert. He knew that he would never be permitted to leave peaceably on any sort of plea that he didn't wish to join the gang.

Only about twenty men were here. Barrett was sure that number was not all of the forces of the powerful organisation. Listening to the talk about the table and in the long bunk-room after supper he acquired confirmation of the guess. There were references to more men and "the rest of the herd," wonder expressed as to why they had not come in. Nobody went to bed. Lena, Tyban and Honing disappeared into that other room. The other men, talking and smoking, sat around in the light given off by the fireplace. They gave little notice to Barrett, but were not unfriendly.

The storm did not abate its fury. Frequent flashes of lightning whitened the windows at the front and deafening claps of thunder made the house tremble. Rain beat upon the roof in a steadily hissing torrent.

"They'll never git the rest o' the long-horned, wild devils in here through this hell-buster," one man declared, listening to the furious elements outside.

"They'll do plenty to git jest themselves in 'crost that risin' crick," another added. "This ain't gonna let up soon."

"Harry'll raise hell with Johnny Sanders if he don't git 'em in," still another, a hard-eyed, bearded man said. "It's more'n half the herd—'bout three thousand head."

"Johnny Sanders!" Barrett repeated the name mentally. "Lena Sanders!"

"I still don't see w'y Harry'd leave the kid in charge o' bringin' 'em in. That's a job fer a lots tougher herd boss."

Several men laughed then. Barrett recognised the note of wise reserve in the laughter. One of those who laughed finally dared to half explain.

"You sure cain't see fur ahead o' your nose, Winky," he said. "Harry's workin' the kid in—wants to make a man o' his young cousin, maybe change the way a certain young lady looks at things."

It was nearly midnight before the growing tension of the expectant waiting was broken. Tyban and Honing had come out of the other room long before. Lena Sanders remained in seclusion. Harry Tyban was silently scowling his displeasure about something.

Oren Barrett pretended to sleep for a two-hour stretch in one of the bunks, hat over his face. But he remained keenly awake, listening to the mixed conversations about him. When the general cry of "There they come!" went up and everybody started a rush to the front door, running out into the rain, he slipped from the bunk.

Within a few minutes there was nothing but a confusion of voices, loud talk, cursing and threats bandied back and forth out toward the corrals. Lanterns had been lighted out there. Barrett had stood in the doorway debating whether to go out in the pouring rain without his mackintosh, that had been put away by the coloured boy, or remain and try to seek further information from the troubled girl. He was alone until Lena Sanders came out of the other room and picked up the piece of wagon sheet which she

had thrown into a corner. She did not look at, or speak to Barrett. He said:

"Where'd the coloured boy put my mackintosh? I'll go with you if you've gotta go out there, Miss Sanders."

She held the piece of canvas poised, ready to throw over her head and shoulders, looking at him with a strangely studious gaze. A wry twist played upon her full, shapely lips. He read unspoken contempt in her expression and for the first time in his life he felt the belittling sting of humiliation before a woman's glance.

"I don't know why I should tell you," she said, quiet scorn in the strength of her voice, "but I guess I'd try to save the life of a snapping, mad cur if Harry Tyban was going to kill it. They are going to let you stay for a little while, then they'll take you along to Dodge. Just outside of town you'll be shot and your body delivered to the law for the blood money you're worth."

CHAPTER IV

"How could they get away with that, they being criminals, themselves?" Barrett asked the girl, suspicious still that he was being tested.

"You poor fool!" she said, lifting the canvas to her shoulders. She stepped over nearer him and looked out into the roaring, dark inferno of the storm. "Harry Tyban is a respected business man in Dodge. He is a second cousin of Johnny and me. We were orphans and he helped us. Got us to come down from Hays City where a gunman, like you, killed our father. He gave Johnny work as a cowboy down here, helping to drive cattle to the railroad points in eastern Kansas. We never suspected that the cattle were rustled stock until he told Johnny the other day that he would have to help steal this big herd that was on its way up the Chisholm Trail. Johnny at first refused. Harry showed him a list of rustlers wanted by the law. Johnny's name was on that list. Then we knew that Harry Tyban had done that to Johnny to brand him and make him—and me—do what he wanted."

"Part of what he wanted was that you marry him," Barrett accused. She looked around at him suddenly, startled.

"How did you know that?" she demanded quickly. "Did you overhear—yes, you eavesdropped at the door of that room to-night."

"I did not. I can put two and two together. I been thinking you might be helping 'em try me out, but maybe you're not. You look sorta skeered, yourself, you poor kid."

She drew back from him, a spasm of loathing wrenching her face. "You! You thought I would help Harry Tyban try you out? Ugh! If you knew how I hate every one of them—you—killers, rustlers, outlaws! Don't touch me!"

She ran from him, throwing the wagon sheet over her head as she dashed through the doorway. She plunged into the storm as a blinding flash of lightning made the whole world about them whiter than in midday sunlight. He ran after her, a step behind. Within ten steps the rain had him soaking wet to the skin. Men's voices were lifted again in loud, impassioned cries under the long branding-shed, but the words were indistinguishable because of the intermittent thunder overhead and the constant bawling of countless frightened, maddened longhorns penned within the corrals.

The girl led the race on to the end of the shed. A great many more men were crowded under the shed than Barrett had seen in the house—more than twice as many. They were packed closely. Lena Sanders hesitated behind the close phalanx of first men who were intent on watching some tableau being enacted in the middle of the shed-covered space where lanterns lit the scene.

Barrett stood beside the girl, his hand touching her back protectively and she did not flinch from him. Perhaps she was unaware of his close presence as she listened to the words of a young man who spoke

vehemently over in that lighted circle of packed men.

"I've told you straight, Harry," the agitated, youthful voice was saying, "they got horses from another trail crew that was coming back from delivering cattle at Dodge. They trailed our part of the herd and jumped us just 'fore the storm broke, stampeded 'em in the fork of the Cimarron and a big creek. Less'n half the boys was with me behind the herd and they killed some of them before our other men got together and come in behind these here Texans. We cooped 'em up under some trees. A few of them was killed before their ammunition give out and the others give up. Jukes and the others wanted to shoot them down. I wouldn't let 'em. I wouldn't have such cold-blooded murder on my hands. I wanted to let 'em go, but Jukes said he'd kill me if I didn't bring the fellers in here for you to 'tend to. That's all of it. We brought them in. Here they are. If you want to murder them in cold blood, that's your business. *You've made a rustler out of me, Harry Tyban, but you won't make a murderer out of——*"

The hysterical, high-pitched youth's voice shut off suddenly as an unmistakable sound of smashing fist squashed the words in his mouth. Lena Sanders screamed and beat at the backs of the closely packed men before her, attempting to force a way in to her brother. Oren Barrett ran over to the high pole fence, where the rain again beat upon him. He climbed to the highest pole and looked over the heads of the packed mob. In the light of the lanterns over in the centre of the shed he saw and quickly counted fourteen wet and bedraggled cowboys, hands tied behind them, circled by the thirty-five or forty rustlers.

A young fellow was just picking himself up from the ground before Harry Tyban and Jock Honing. Tyban turned his head just then, apparently hearing Lena Sanders' screams for the first time.

"Don't let her in here," he ordered toward the men barring the girl's efforts to enter the circle. He turned back to the youth and continued: "Now, we'll see, Johnny, if you'll have anything to do with it. I've been patient with you and Lena, but to-night I've decided to bring things to a head. You'll do what I say, or I'll fill you full of lead. I don't trust you with a gun any more, or I'd make you kill them, yourself, one by one. But you'll still help to finish them.

"We'll 'tend to them like we finished the other sneaking spies that come up from Texas smelling around where they oughtn't. Take those ropes from the posts over there, Johnny, and get busy tying the ankles of them Texas skunks, and see that you tie them good and tight."

"Good God, Harry, you can't do that to all these here men!" the wild-faced youth cried, looking at Tyban with widened horror in his eyes. He wiped blood from his mouth. "I won't help! Go ahead and shoot me! I won't do it!"

The screaming attack Lena Sanders had made on the packed circle of men had ceased. Barrett, watching the tense scene under the shed as he sat in the pouring rain on the corral fence, was not aware of the girl's presence until she was nearly to the top of the fence behind him and very close. He turned and helped her to a secure seat beside him on the topmost pole while he held them both steady with an arm around the post in front of him. His left arm was around the girl's waist.

With a shock of surprise he saw the gun dimly in the girl's hand as she lifted it toward Harry Tyban. He seized the big gun and easily wrenched it from her grasp. They nearly fell from the fence, but he regained their balance and held her closely.

"You murderer!" she hissed at him. "I thought you said you would help me! Well, I need help bad enough to take it from even you and now you stop me from killing Harry Tyban who is going to kill my brother! Give me that gun!"

"Listen, girl!" he whispered hastily. "I promise to plant a bullet in Tyban straighter'n you could, if he starts to shoot the kid. I've got a better idea. What is it they aim to do to the tied-up cowboys?"

"They'll tie them up, drag a green cowhide all over them to put the smell of fresh-killed beef on them, throw them out in the corral and throw the green hide close to them. The longhorns go mad when they smell the fresh hide and then they paw and hook and tear the men to pieces. That's what happened to three other men in the last year or so. I've heard them laughing and telling it so many times! It's horrible! If you've got any manhood left in you, go ahead now and kill Harry Tyban and Jock Honing. They're back of it all!"

They watched while the pale, cowed brother of Lena Sanders gave in to the menacing command of Harry Tyban. Slowly, reluctantly, the helpless youth, who could be but two or three years older than his sister, began to take the ropes from pegs and prepare them for tying the prisoners' ankles. Some of the surrounding men laughed when they saw the surrender of the fearful boy. Lena Sanders again begged Barrett to shoot Harry Tyban.

"Where'd they put my guns?" he asked her. "Where's that gun box?"

"In the kitchen, but it's padlocked and Jock Honing has the key."

"I saw a poker and axe setting beside the fireplace cooker in the kitchen. Come on, quick!"

He dropped to the ground and helped the girl down. They were ten feet from the nearest of the men who gave all of their attention to the ugly work under the shed. Barrett caught Lena's hand and ran with her toward the porch of the kitchen. While he was holstering the gun he had taken from her, he bumped into a tree. The blackness of night seemed thick enough to slice. Lena drew him over to the right and guided their run on to the porch.

"Will the coloured man and boy try to stop us?" he asked.

"They're probably sound asleep in their back room at the far end, but they wouldn't bother us. They're held here like slaves and they'd do anything to help me if I ask."

They were in the big kitchen-dining-room. Barrett ran to the fireplace where a few end pieces of wood still gave off a dull glow of live coals. He snatched up the axe and black poker rod.

"Where's the box?" he demanded.

She led him to a far corner where only the merest film of light from the fireplace reached. He had to feel of the big, long box to find the heavy padlock. While he worked to force the blade of the axe under the lid of the box, he asked the girl:

"Have they got many guns—any ammunition in here?"

"All of the extra supplies," she said. "I don't know how much."

It was a big box, three feet high and as wide. Barrett did not take time to measure its length in the darkness. He pried up with the axe, got the lid open a half-inch and slipped the poker rod through the crack. The padlock and chain gave off a metallic crunching and screeching under his attack, but the lid held.

He slipped the iron poker through the chain and bent it badly in his straining effort to break the lock or splinter the lid top where the steel chain links passed through a hole. There came an extra brilliant flash of lightning. Barrett dropped the poker and lifted the axe hurriedly, just in time for the volcanic roar of thunder that followed the lightning. He struck fiercely with all of his might, making a slanting stroke with the point of the axe blade at the lid edge beside the chain, near the hole. The noise of the stroke was effectually smothered by the thunder. Lena Sanders, standing near in tensed waiting, made a cry of surprise.

With the axe-blade again shoved under the lid, Barratt pried again and felt the thick, hewn wood of the lid bulge and give under his attack. A moment more and it splintered and cracked as the chain finally gave up its hold. He threw the lid back and poked the axe-handle exploringly around in the box. Metal clinked. He felt with his hands and found rifles and six-guns. At one end of the long, deep box there were pasteboard boxes filled with cartridges. He could tell by their size and

weight that they were both Winchester and six-gun cartridges.

Hastily he lifted out six-guns. There were still many more in the box after he had counted out fourteen weapons that he believed, judging by the bore of the muzzles, to be .45s.

"What are you going to do with all these guns?" Lena asked, standing over him.

"I hate to tell you 'fore I try it out," was all he would answer as he began filling his pockets and shirt bosom with .45 cartridge-boxes. He tore open some boxes and worked feverishly loading the fourteen empty .45s he had laid out on the floor. When he had loaded the last gun, he arose and spoke to the girl.

"Give me that piece of wagon sheet to tote these guns in. You stay in the house —find a safe place out of bullet reach."

CHAPTER V

He dragged the wagon sheet from her shoulders. She protested and demanded more information, pleaded for a chance to help him.

"You can help," he snapped in his great haste. "Get me the sharpest knife the cook's got here. Hurry!"

She ran away to a side table beyond the fireplace and came back in a moment, pushed a sharp-edged bowie knife into his hand. He stuck it under his belt, picked up the corners of the wagon sheet on to which he had piled the fourteen guns, slung the load over his shoulder and ran for the door to the porch. The girl ran beside him and cried:

"For heaven's sake, tell me what you intend to do! Listen! They're throwing those helpless cowboys into the cow-pens now—the cattle are going mad!"

"Stay in the house!" he ordered. "There's gonna be hell popping out there pretty soon! Stay back!"

"I won't!" she screamed against the fury of the storm, running out on the ground after him. "Johnny's out there! I've got to find him—get him away!"

"All right, but do it quick and get clear away before bullets start flying!"

He jogged along swiftly under his heavy burden. She darted away in the darkness toward the dim reflection of lantern light above the heads of the mob under the shed. Some of the many men were climbing back over the high pole fence from inside the corral this side of the branding-chute. Their frantically hurrying forms were barely visible shadows as Barrett rushed on toward them. He knew from the increased fury of bawling inside the fence and from the different tone of the fearful sounds that the bound Texans were already stretched helplessly upon the ground inside, ready for the gory slaughter.

There was a continuous uproar of shouting voices along the fence as the followers of Tyban and Honing, perhaps the two leaders themselves, tried to see into the dark corral. The rain was still slashing down so furiously that it was impossible to bring the lanterns from under the shed to turn their light upon the tragedy about to occur.

Barrett turned in behind a corner of the corral fence some twenty steps from the nearest of the rustlers. The fence made a bend off to the right. He followed that line for a few steps and then boldly climbed to the top pole, going with great effort, having only one free hand.

The fury of the longhorned beasts milling about in the mud and darkness only a little distance away was working up to the point of attack. The peculiar bellowing which cattle emit at smell of raw, fresh beef was rending the night. Countless horns clacked together in the closely packed, churning, moving mass.

With his gun drawn in right hand, Barrett dropped to the ground inside the corral. His boots sank deeply in the mud. For a few seconds his blood ran cold, chilling fear and hopelessness flashed over him. He stood there, realising how extremely slight his chances were of finding the bound men that he was certain had been dropped somewhere inside the corral. The fact that the wild cattle had been temporarily frightened back from this west side of the pen convinced him that somewhere near-by he would find the struggling, desperate cowboys trying, no doubt, to free each other before the death-dealing hoofs and horns found them.

A flickering gleam of lightning gave a second of illumination which was only enough for a blurred vision. Barrett was still pressing against the fence, on the point of starting out across the corral in his perilous search. Dimly he saw moving shapes on the ground slightly to his left, nearer the other line of fence. Many men clung to the top poles over there while they waited for the fury of the longhorns to bring the agonised, terrified cries from the victims. Another, longer flash and those killers who waited so ghoulishly for their entertainment would see this threatened interuption of their circus.

Barrett had had his face turned more to the left during the flicking flash of lightning and had not seen how close were the nearest pawing, bellowing animals. He could hesitate no longer. Those moving shapes on the ground could be no other than the intended victims. He ran toward the nearest that he had seen. The distance was shorter than he had calculated. His feet struck a moving body and the man he touched shrieked in terror, obviously believing that a longhorn was upon him. A sudden burst of louder shouts and laughter came from the fence top nearby.

Dropping to his knees in the mud, Barrett deposited the bundle of guns and spoke low to the terrified man.

"Quiet, pardner!" he warned. "I'm a friend—gonna cut you loose—give you a gun—all of you!"

While he spoke he jerked the kitchen knife from his belt and was feeling for the muddied man's thongs. He found that this man was not only bound hand and foot, but was tied to the next man. They were all tied together in a chain so that they could not roll individually toward the fence and lessened danger against the poles. This much Barrett quickly surmised, even before the frightened cowboy regained his wits and spoke.

"Who're you, feller?" the prostrate man demanded. "You sure 'nough gonna git us out?"

The neighbouring man raised up on one elbow partially and asked a similar question, a threat of hysteria in his voice. Barrett did not answer with words. He had already cut the cords of rope around the first man's wrists, was reaching for those about his ankles. A blinding flash of lightning came then. Barrett fell over, flattened himself beside the man he had freed. The white flash died out, leaving them again in utter darkness while the thunder rolled overhead and rain crashed down in renewed fury.

"Here," Barrett ordered the freed man, "take hold the corners of this canvas—don't spill the guns—stick one in your belt, or pants! Drag 'em along—give one to every man as I cut 'im loose. Here, take this box of cartridges! If the lightning comes again, lie flat quick!"

By the time he got to the third man in his frenzied use of the keen-edged knife he knew that the black mass of maddened cattle were crowding in upon them, working up their courage for the attack. The bellowing and clacking of horns was a constant refrain and deafening. The shouts of the men on the fence were scarcely audible now, drowned by the nearer uproar of the herd. Barrett warned the freed men to help distribute the guns and cartridges and not to shoot the threatening longhorns unless these actually charged upon them.

The seventh man had been freed. Barrett was having to repeatedly warn the rejoicing cowboys to withhold their exuberance and remain on the ground where they had been for fear another flash of

lightning would reveal to their enemies what was going on. He told them to wait for the signal when the last man was freed.

A lull came to the bawling of the cattle as if a subtle message had been flashed among them. That was ominous to the men who were wise in the ways of the beasts. Some of them were at last advancing to the attack. Perhaps these attackers would paw up a few more splashes of mud, then the rush and the swishing of killing horns.

"What the devil's goin' on in there?" somebody at the fence yelled and then Barrett, knifing at the ropes of the eighth prisoner, recognised the voice of Jock Honing. "Somebody hang a hat over one o' the lanterns and bring it out here! Harry, them longhorned sons o' Satan are takin' mighty long to get started!"

One of the freed cowboys crawled after Barrett and said: "I got a jack-knife the skunks didn't find, pardner! Let me help cut 'em loose!"

"Crawl down to the last man and come this way, then!" Barrett commanded.

Then came the clacking of hoof joints, the squashing of mud and deafening chorus of mad cow bellows as a black wave of longhorn bulls swept across the muddy ground, heads lowered, ferocious, keen-pointed horns slashing. Barrett threw himself in a straight line beside the eighth man whom he had just freed, pulling the man down flat and shouting to the man toiling along with the guns to lie down.

His warning to the first man he had freed was too late. The fearful, excitable fellow fired his gun pointblank into the face of a charging longhorn. Men on the fence were yelling with gleeful anticipation. More guns spat jets of flame, their explosions blanketed by the greater uproar of the herd. The charging wave of animals passed, split up, frightened by the flash of guns, piled up against the fence.

Barrett heard the groans of a man nearby who had not yet been cut loose, heard them faintly through the tumult of shouted questions and hoarse yells at the fence. He found the man had been stepped upon and hurt painfully. In a few seconds he had freed that one and was working over another when the men already freed crowded around him, crouching, guns in hand, shouting questions.

"If any of you've got knives, get busy!" Barrett shouted at them.

The steer that the man with the guns had shot down kicked wildly in the mud, splashing rain-water and mud in every direction. Some of the free men went on down the line of prostrate prisoners. A faint ray of yellow light suddenly shone upon the motley scene. Floundering, bellowing cattle crowded in the short space between Barrett and the fence, pawing at the ground, or milling about, preparing to charge back in another attack.

CHAPTER VI

Somebody held a lantern up near the top poles of the fence behind the cattle. Its light was not strong enough to reveal clearly what was happening out in the corral. Obviously the onlookers were mystified, still uncertain whether those gunshots or clashing, sparking horns they had seen in the tumult of the charging cattle. If it had not been so impossible to believe they would have known those flashes and muffled roar of guns for what they were.

Two more lanterns now appeared on the fence, sheltered by broad-brimmed hats. Curious men crowded the top of that fence, peering over the scared, bawling cattle out toward the open space where the helpless prisoners should be. One man with a lantern waved the flickering light at the cattle and shouted. The beasts broke away then, frightened by the light and shouting men, but they did not charge upon the men on the ground. They still remembered the dreaded gunshots that had come from those hated human forms. They cut a wide circle, some going around each side of the men Oren Barrett had released.

The last of the men were free and armed

with one gun apiece and a box of cartridges. They gathered in a huddle around Barrett a moment before the cattle broke away from against the fence to circle them and run for the main herd.

"Scatter, men!" Barrett ordered. "Thin out and charge the fence—give 'em all you got! Make every shot count, 'cause they got us outnumbered three to one! Now!"

He fired the first shot and leaped toward the fence. His shot knocked a man from the top pole. He looked for Tyban and Honing before he fired the next shot, but seeing neither in the poor light of the lanterns, he fired at one of those who went tumbling from the fence then in a wild scramble before the hail of lead. Every one of the cowboys rushed the fence, firing as they went.

The first shock of surprise from the attack quickly passed and many men outside the fence drew guns and returned the fire. A cowboy at Barrett's left, who reached the fence at the same time, staggered backward with a sharp cry of pain, then hit the fence, leaned against a post and thumbed out some fast shots between the poles.

The Tyban-Honing crew were breaking from the shed, running toward the house. Two lanterns that hung from pegs under the shed lighted their going and also lighted the tumult of wounded, dying men scattered around out there by the volleys of lead from the Texans.

Some of the horses, recently ridden in by half of Tyban's crew and by the prisoners, were screaming in fright, perhaps wounded by random bullets out there in the darkness under the trees.

Barrett saw then that he should have taken time to despatch some of the cowboys toward the house to head off their enemies from that refuge. He ran down the fence, calling to the men there to follow him. He climbed the poles at the corner, hit the ground outside and ran through the rain and darkness toward the house.

As he ran, followed by some of his cowboy friends, guns flamed from the front door. In the light from the fireplace in the long bunk-room he saw men stagger back from the front door. Through one of the windows he caught a flashing glimpse of Lena Sanders, gun in hand, then she darted from view, going toward the fireplace end of the room. The Tyban-Honing men rushed the door, guns flaming. Barrett saw Harry Tyban leap through the door in the lead of a dozen men, less fearful of the menace within than from that in the darkness outside.

Guns were still popping out around the shed and corrals, men shouted death cries and defiance there; horses were running away, pounding the wet ground with hurried hoofs as if ridden by men who drove them on. Oren Barrett gave only flashing notice to those sounds behind him.

Lena Sanders, pluckily fighting inside there, was in danger. He fired at the horde of men pouring through the front door, heard his companions doing the same. He shouted to the men with him to go on at that front door, then swerved his course and ran for the kitchen porch, throwing out empty shells and inserting fresh cartridges as he ran.

In the dark kitchen he crashed against a chair, picked himself up as he shouted Lena Sanders' name and ran on toward the faint blob of light framed by the door to the bunk-room. Lena Sanders answered his cry. He found her crouched by the door-facing. She fired the heavy gun in her hands as he dropped down beside her. He saw Harry Tyban and several men stooping and coming on down the room. Two or three of their guns blazed and a bullet splintered the wood above the girl's head. Barrett shoved her back, out of sight, fell lower and poured shots at the scrambling, ducking men.

Harry Tyban had ducked down beside the line of bunks. Guns in the hands of the cowboys outside the front door were pouring a rain of bullets into the room. Tyban men sprawled along the floor, dead or dying; others crawled for the protection of the bunks. The cowboys rushed the door, leaped inside to get at their enemies before these could barricade

themselves. One of those first reckless Texans to enter plunged forward on his face. The others came on, thumbing their guns at the surviving killers within.

Oren Barrett stood up, ready to leap inside after Tyban, who had disappeared behind the angle of the nearest bunk fifteen feet away. Then four men suddenly leaped out from the bunks as if at a signal and ran toward the door of the other room. Harry Tyban was in the lead. He fired at Barrett as he ran and a deadening pain brought instant paralysis to the Texas Ranger's left arm. In the same instant Barrett heard the frantic, screaming voice of Lena Sanders saying:

"Johnny is in there! They'll kill him!"

But two of Tyban's three followers fell then from the cowboys' bullets as Barrett stumbled out into the room and aimed a waist-line shot at Tyban, his shooting arm too weak to lift the gun higher. Tyban staggered sideways against the jamb of the fireplace, went to his knees and lifted his gun toward the wavering form of the Ranger. Barrett was dazed, but he tried to fling himself aside as he thumbed the hammer of his gun back and released it, the muzzle of his weapon only a few feet from the licking flame of Tyban's gun. The world spun around in dizzying gyrations and the floor seemed to come up with a smashing blow against the side of his head, then all sensation faded out.

Through what seemed ages of time to Oren Barrett he was hanging on a high precipice in a nightmare, burning with thirst and suffering pain somewhere about his body which he was helpless to locate or lessen. Finally the nightmare came to an end in a comforting drowsiness and he slept. When he awakenued there was a drone of voices about him. He opened his eyes and looked up, blinking against the bright light of day. He was on a bed and Lena Sanders, her brother Johnny and several cowboys with dry mud still thick on their clothing, stood about his bed.

"I say he's slept long enough," one of the older cowboys was saying. "Them bandages gotta be changed and good food put inside 'im. You cain't kill no Texas outlaw, nohow, less'n you starve 'im."

Lena Sanders saw Barrett's open, clear-seeing eyes and dropped down to sit on the edge of his bed, seizing his hand gently. She smiled hopefully, her dark eyes very bright and devoid of the troubled shadows.

"You're all right, Mr. Barrett?" she asked anxiously. "Do you feel all right? These cowboys insisted on waking you—said you'd be needing food and new dressings on your wounds."

"How long've I been asleep?" he asked, trying to remember just where and when he had known her and the youth. "Where am I? How'd I come to have wounds?"

"Don't you remember coming here yesterday evening, and the fight, and how you saved these cowboys from the wild cattle in the corral? You were wounded, but your wounds aren't dangerous. Smutty, the cook, made up a drink from sleep-weed leaves that got you to sleep this morning after we'd washed and bandaged your wounds. It's late afternoon now. Don't you remember now?"

"Sure, I remember now. Did we get Tyban and Honing and the rest of their outfit?"

"Bet your life, pardner," the old cowboy declared. "We got Honing out there under the shed. You killed Tyban when he was tryin' to fill you with lead stuffin'. Some o' the devils skinned out a-hossback, but this rustler gang is busted for good and the old Chisholm Trail is clear. These here youngsters warn't really a part o' the gang. We're lettin' them stay here to git you well, then go where they like. We got nearly all our rustled herd rounded up and ready to drive on to Dodge. What we wanted to know, 'fore we pull out, was if we couldn't do something to square things for you down in Texas when we git back. We'd raise the roof offa hell, itself, to git the gov'nor to pardon you. No man ever done a braver, finer thing than you done for us fellers 'gin them wild longhorns last night. What say, pardner? Want us to go see the gov'nor at Austin and tear 'im to pieces if he don't fix things for you?"

"Nope, ol' waddy pardner," Barrett said, grinning, "Just go to Jim Barstow when you get to Dodge and tell him that you're reporting for Oren Barrett, private in Company B, Texas Rangers, and say that I've finished my chore up here and will be drifting back soon to my Company duties in the Big Bend. And don't forget to tell him to pull down all them posters about Luke Barnett, alias Oren Barrett, the bad Texas outlaw. I don't want no trigger itchy hombres dropping me for the reward and being so sore disappointed when they find I'm not worth a cent."

There was open-mouthed amazement on every face. Lena Sanders was the first to recover her speech.

"A Texas Ranger!" she cried, swaying with happiness on the edge of the bed as she began to laugh. "And I was so sure——"

She did not finish, but began laughing again with the others who understood then and gave spontaneous expression to their relieved feelings with peals of merriment.

"I'll be a hornswoggled sunuvagun!" the spokesman of the cowboys exclaimed. "If I hadna been so muleyheaded I mighta guessed it. What's worse pizen than a bad Texas outlaw if it ain't a Texas Ranger!"

THE OTHER VALLEY

By HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS

BEDROCK'S partner, Young Hardesty, wiped his hot face as his eyes followed the older man's pointing finger. Two men were coming down the mountain trail on foot. They would arrive at the Mebbyso mine just about in time for dinner.

Bedrock put more coffee in the pot and laid out two extra tin plates. It was a lonely life at the Mebbyso Mine, especially for Young Hardesty, who was sixteen, and chuck full of energy and curiosity. The advent of visitors loomed big.

When the strangers arrived at the camp, Young Hardesty was surprised that one of them was a tall girl. The man with her, lean, swarthy, with a curly black beard, carried a Winchester across his arm and walked like a cowpuncher.

"What's the news, neighbour?" he said as he sauntered over to the lean-to.

"That's what I was wondering," Bedrock said.

The tall stranger laughed. "My name is Wilson. This is my girl Emily."

The girl was dark, slender and strong, with deep blue eyes His face a shade redder than usual, Young Hardesty didn't seem to see that the girl had offered to shake hands. He pretended to be deeply interested in preparing dinner.

As they sat eating under the lean-to, Wilson said he had filed on the relinquished homestead south of the Mebbyso mine. That meant that Bedrock and Young Hardesty would have neighbours. The new homesteader, who seemed a quiet, friendly sort of person, had come over to borrow a crosscut saw. After dinner Young Hardesty washed the dishes. The girl dried them.

Young Hardesty felt that it was up to him to entertain the girl. "You came a long 'way round to get here, Miss Wilson."

"Over the mountain? Well, dad thought he might pick up a deer. We're short of fresh meat."

"When I travel I ride a horse."

The girl's eyes twinkled. "Can you?"

"I said so, didn't I?"

"My, you're tough! Dad tells a story about a man who was so tough he wore a muzzle so he wouldn't bite himself. Won't you show me around the mine?"

"Sure!" Young Hardesty began to feel more at ease. He escorted his guest about the mine flat, discoursed upon shafts, drifts, stopes, timbering and high and low grade ore. "Say, just heft that. There's about five dollars worth of gold in that chunk. You can take it along with you."

"Honest?"

"I said so, didn't I?"

"You're not as tough as you think you are," said Emily Wilson. "Come over to our spread sometime and I'll show you around."

"I'll do that. There's your dad wavin' to you."

That evening Bedrock and his young partner compared notes. The Wilsons seemed to be right friendly folk. Wilson had said he used to raise cattle in the Tonto Valley. Bedrock wondered why a cattleman should take to homesteading on the desert side of the range. It didn't seem regular. Emily Wilson, he declared, was all right.

"Meanin' her dad ain't?" queried Young Hardesty.

"I wouldn't say just that. But something is bothering him, and it ain't just homesteading."

ABOUT a week later Young Hardesty decided to make a hunt for deer. As an excuse to call on the Wilsons he would take some dear meat to them. With his old sawed-off Sharp's in the scabbard he set out on his pony, Shingles.

As he rode slowly up the mountain trail he wondered how the new homesteaders were making it. Homesteading on the desert was a tough game. Now if Wilson had taken up land on the western side of the range, a district known locally as The Other Valley, he might have been able to make a go of it. Wilson said he was going to raise alfalfa. That didn't sound regular, either. It took a lot of water to raise alfalfa. The spring on the homestead benchland south of the Mebbyso wasn't big enough for that. But that was Wilson's lookout.

Shortly after Young Hardesty reached the timbered crest of the range he jumped a buck. He fired and missed. While trailing the deer down the western slope he smelled smoke. He peered around. Half hidden by a clump of junipers was a gaunt cow. He noted the brand—W-Bar-2. He had never seen that brand before. It wasn't the Henty brand. Maybe Wilson was running a few head in The Other Valley himself. But how about the smell of smoke?

Arriving at the edge of a small clearing, Young Hardesty pulled up his horse and stared. Across the clearing stood a stocky cow pony. A cow lay hogtied near the pony. Beyond her Wilson knelt over a calf. The smell of singed hair and hide came to Young Hardesty.

Wilson rose. Bawling lustily, the calf took to the brush. Young Hardesty caught a glimpse of the raw brand, W-Bar-2. Wilson was branding calves, which was perfectly all right. But when he turned the cow loose and ran for his horse, and Young Hardesty saw that the cow bore the Henty brand, he decided that it wasn't all right at all.

As Wilson swung to the saddle, Young Hardesty's pony nickered. The man with the black, curly beard had Young Hardesty covered before he could speak.

"Turn your horse round," said Wilson, "and keep going."

"Hell! I'm Joe Hardesty. What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

Paying no attention to what Young Hardesty said, Wilson kept his rifle levelled.

"Oh, if that's the way you feel about it, I'll move along."

Young Hardesty hated to back down. But he saw that Wilson meant business, so he swung round and rode up the valley.

He was sore all over, but not because the homesteader was stealing cattle. Bigger men than Wilson did that right along. But to be held up and given marching orders without a chance to say two words didn't set any too well. Emily Wilson had said that Young Hardesty wasn't as tough as he thought he was. Young Hardesty didn't agree with that. If her old man hadn't got the drop on him, he would have shown one member of the Wilson family which way was north. Hell of a fine neighbour, he was.

"Why, doggone him!" snorted Young Hardesty, "if he'd 'a started something and I'd had anything like an even break, I'd a blowed a hole through him so big there wouldn't be any edges."

Having got rid of his surplus spleen, Young Hardesty felt better. On the crest he jumped three deer, swung on the leader and dropped him neatly.

Bedrock stood shading his eyes against the western sun when Young Hardesty stalked into camp, the deer across the saddle.

"Reckon you found something," said Bedrock.

"I sure did." But Young Hardesty said nothing about the calf branding. His neck was still pretty hot. He wanted time to think it over.

"Mebby Wilson could use some of this meat," suggested Bedrock. "We got more than a plenty."

"Mebby he could. But he ain't gettin' any unless he comes for it."

Old Bedrock's eyebrows went up. It wasn't like the boy to be unneighbourly.

BEDROCK seemed a bit surprised when, next morning, Young Hardesty said he was going over to the Wilson homestead with some deer meat. Bedrock was pleased that the boy had changed his mind.

Young Hardesty was curious as to what kind of a layout Wilson had. He was also curious as to what Wilson would do when he again met the fellow who had caught him branding a Henty calf. Saddling up Shingles Young Hardesty set out.

Dividing the benchland south of the Mebbyso mine ran a low, brush-covered ridge. Three miles beyond the mine lay the homestead. Some fifty or sixty acres had been cleared by the former homesteader. South of the clearing, almost against the foothills, stood a log cabin, sheds and corrals. In one of the corrals loafed three saddle horses. It seemed queer that Wilson had come over to the mine on foot.

At Young Hardesty's hail, Emily Wilson came to the doorway.

"Fetched a little deer meat along," he said. "Thought mebbe you could use it."

"Thanks. Yes indeed we can. I'm so tired of beef——" the girl hesitated at Young Hardesty's swift glance.

"Bedrock and me," he said, grinning, "are getting mighty tired of deer meat. That kind of evens things up."

"Father is up at the spring," said the girl. "He'll be down pretty soon." She now wore a gingham gown. The other day in an old Stetson, rowdy and jeans, she had seemed mannish—not nearly so good looking as she did when dressed like a woman.

Young Hardesty's heart thumped. A wife like that to cook for a man, and keep the place neat, wouldn't be so bad. He sat with one leg crossed over his knee, twirling a spur rowel with his thumb. He couldn't think of anything to say.

When the girl went out to hang the deer meat in the cooler, Young Hardesty sized up the cabin. Three saddles hung on the wall of the main room, above them a carbine in its boot, a pair of spurs, chaps and an old Stetson. Someone had burnt the brand W-Bar-2 on the doorpost, evidently the Wilson brand.

"I'm going to the spring to call Dad," said Emily Wilson. "Mind if I take your pony?" Not waiting for permission, she swung into the saddle and left, the astonished Shingles kicking gravel at every jump.

Young Hardesty curled a cigarette. That female sure could ride! Skirts didn't bother her any. He wondered if she were as handy with a branding iron as her father. He also wondered just what her father would have to say. Wilson's spread was actually a cow camp, not a homestead. Young Hardesty was ready to call Wilson's bluff, let him know that he wasn't in the habit of backing down. If Wilson seemed friendly, Young Hardesty was quite willing to forget the calf branding. If Wilson wasn't friendly —well, no one could say what might happen. And that was just what Young Hardesty wished to determine. He didn't anticipate trouble, but he regretted that his Sharp's was on his saddle, and the girl was riding Shingles.

Young Hardesty was seated on the doorstep, smoking a cigarette, when Wilson and his daughter came down the spring trail. He rose and acknowledged Wilson's friendly, "Mornin', neighbour." Wilson pointed to a jackrabbit near the edge of the distant brush. "Can you drop him from here?"

"I could, all right," said Young Hardesty, immediately on his guard. "But my gun is a single shot. You're packin' a repeater."

Wilson's rifle came up. He fired. The jack dropped and lay kicking. It was a swift, sure shot. Wilson could handle a rifle. But that wasn't all that Young Hardesty noted. The three saddle horses in the corral opposite hadn't even twitched an ear at the sound of the shot. Evidently Wilson didn't use gun-shy horses.

The men sat on the doorstep. Emily Wilson was busy in the kitchen.

"How long you been in this country?" said Wilson.

"Long enough to find my way home if it ain't too dark."

"Spent much time on the other side of the range—in The Other Valley?"

It was in The Other Valley that Young Hardesty had come upon Wilson branding a Henty calf. "Mostly travelling through, or after deer, like I was yesterday."

"Emily tells me you got your deer, all right."

"I got him." Young Hardesty rose and took his Sharp's rifle from the saddle. "You can hit a deer almost anywhere with this, and he'll stay down. It belonged to a renegade Indian. He was through usin' it when I took it off him."

Emily Wilson came to the doorway. "Are you the Young Hardesty that killed the Navajo buck over in the Pinnacles?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Won't you tell us about it?"

"No, ma'am. It ain't healthy to talk about folks you bumped off. The Navajo got to crowdin' me too clost."

Wilson's beard hid a smile. "Don't know that I'd want to stack up against that gun myself."

"Shucks! It's only a single shot." Young Hardesty stood the rifle against the cabin and sat down again. Wilson was pleasant enough. He didn't seem to be worrying any about calf branding. Even so, Young Hardesty was still on his guard. As a boy in Bowdry he had seen killers act mighty smooth when they were getting ready to let some fellows have it.

"Father," said Emily Wilson in a troubled tone, "did you notice the way the horses are acting?"

"A couple of buzzards are circling to get that jack I shot. Makes the horses nervous."

He had scarcely spoken when a rifle spoke in the brush across the clearing. A slug thudded into the doorpost. Wilson

jumped back into the cabin. Young Hardesty grabbed up his Sharp's and dove for the back of the building. He peered round the corner of the cabin, thought he saw a movement in the distant brush, and fired.

Across in the corral the three horses stood quietly looking toward the southern slope of the ridge. The buzzards had winged higher and were floating in big circles. A lizard scampered across the door yard. It was so still that Young Hardesty thought he could almost hear the brush crackle in the heat of the sun.

"Come round to the back door," said Emily Wilson.

As Young Hardesty came up the girl glanced at him in a peculiar manner. "Who was it?"

"You're askin' me. All I know is, that slug pretty nigh got your dad."

WILSON stood back from the front doorway, peering out across the clearing.

"What were you shooting at?" he called to Young Hardesty.

"I saw somethin' move. Hope I didn't plug one of your cows."

"You didn't," said Wilson positively. "Emily, I'm going to take a look 'round."

"I'll side you," said Young Hardesty.

They crept through the brush, beginning a circle that would finally land them on the slope across the clearing. In about twenty minutes they had reached the spot from which the shot was fired. Round about were the tracks of shod horses. Wilson picked up an empty forty-five-seventy Winchester shell. Young Hardesty poked through the brush searching the ground. In a minute or so he was back. "Come on over here. I found somethin'."

It was a dead saddle horse. Saddle and bridle had been stripped off. The horse had been shot through the lungs. The bullet had gone clear through. "I reckon my slug got him," said Young Hardesty. The dead animal was branded H-Cross-H. That would be the Henty brand.

Wilson said nothing till they again reached the cabin.

"There's a dead horse over yonder," he told his daughter. "He's carrying the Henty brand."

"Father!"

Wilson and his daughter exchanged glances.

"I ain't surprised any," said Wilson.

"I was, kind of," Young Hardesty gathered up the reins of his pony. "I'll be lightin' a shuck for the mine. So-long, neighbour. Good-bye, Miss Wilson. I'm wishin' you-all good luck."

Young Hardesty told Bedrock about the recent happenings, beginning with the calf branding in the Other Valley. The whole business was mighty queer.

"Wilson," stated Bedrock, "don't act like a cow thief. He was telling me he used to run stock over in the Tonto Valley. There's nothing queer about that, but it's kind of interesting when you put the pieces of this here puzzle together. Old Man Henty, who was killed in the Tonto Basin war, was likewise running stock in the Basin when Wilson was living there. Folks say that Henty and his boys were kind of careless about branding anything in sight. When Old Man Henty got killed, the boys lit out. They settled yonder in The Other Valley, long before you and me was pardners. You've talked with 'em. You know what they are like."

"I told Bill Henty to go to hell once, when he asked me what I was doin' in The Other Valley. Bob Henty was with him. They showed me a fresh hide with their brand on it. Somebody had beefed one of their yearlings and got away with the meat."

"The Henty boys are willing to suspect anybody. Don't know as I blame 'em. There ain't many folks riding in The Other Valley. That there yearling didn't commit suicide."

"I told 'em that if I beefed any of their stock I wouldn't leave the hide layin' around where they would find it. They didn't bother me none, after that."

"Just between you and me," said Bedrock, "Tonto Basin folks used to say that

Old Man Henty and his boys stole Wilson blind. You'll have to figure out the rest of it yourself."

That morning, while the partners worked at clearing away the rock from a shot put in the day before, Young Hardesty silently speculated as to the outcome of Wilson's arrival in the neighbourhood. There was one Henty calf carrying Wilson's brand, and one dead saddle horse carrying the Henty brand. So far, it looked as if Wilson had just a little bit the best of it. Did the fellow that shot at him send the slug as a warning—miss him by inches purposely? Did the unseen rifleman imagine that kind of a bluff would scare Wilson out of the country? Young Hardesty didn't think it would. That meant there would be more trouble. Probably somebody would get killed. Anyhow, it wasn't fair to the girl that Wilson should play that kind of a game. She might get hurt. At a little distance, dressed in rowdy and jeans, she looked just like a man. One of the Henty boys might make a mistake. Young Hardesty cursed under his breath.

"What you mumbling about?" queried Bedrock.

"Grub. We started in late this mornin'. I don't know what time it is in here. But I reckon it's about noon, outside."

NEXT day, about four in the afternoon, Wilson and his daughter appeared at the Mebbyso mine. They were both mounted. Emily Wilson led a spare horse bearing a heavy pack. Her face was grave. She nodded to Bedrock and Young Hardesty. Gazing past the girl Young Hardesty saw a thin web of smoke in the southern sky.

"Must be a brush fire," he exclaimed.

Wilson shook his head. "The cabin and sheds. Burned clean to the ground. Emily and I had been over the hill all day. We saw the blaze just as we topped the ridge west of the homestead. That was about three. We made a ride, but we were too late."

"Burned out!" said Bedrock. "Now that's right bad news, neighbour."

Wilson gestured toward the pack horse. "We saved a little of our stuff—enough to do us for a spell. Lucky our beds were outside last night. We been sleeping out lately, account of the heat."

"Why don't you folks make camp up at the spring yonder?" suggested Young Hardesty. "It's cool up there, and nobody'll bother you."

"That's right!" said Bedrock heartily. "We got plenty grub on hand. All you got to do is make yourself to home."

Wilson glanced at his daughter. She flushed and nodded.

"You can stake your horses in the meadow above the spring," said Young Hardesty. "It's close enough so you can keep an eye on them just in case—just in case a mountain lion or somebody comes down the hill."

A spare tarp, a bucket, some cooking things and a supply of provisions, with what the Wilsons had salvaged, enabled the refugees to make a comfortable camp.

Later, when the partners were alone, Young Hardesty asked Bedrock point-blank who had set fire to the homestead. Bedrock pulled at his pipe a long time before he answered. "Emily Wilson says there weren't a fire in the stove when they left. Couldn't 've been one of the cows. Never seen a cow that could strike a match."

"Huh! You teachin' Sunday School?"

"It ain't Sunday," chuckled Bedrock.

"Well I reckon I know who touched off that fire," declared Young Hardesty. "An' I reckon Wilson knows, even if he didn't see anybody do it."

"Well, we got company, anyhow," declared Bedrock. He nodded toward the thin web of smoke in the southern sky. "I wouldn't be surprised if we had more company before this here clears up. I'd took 'em in if they had been weasels."

"Weasels!" snorted Young Hardesty. "What I mean, the weasels that set fire to that cabin was brothers. And they don't spell their name with a *W*, neither."

"Our friend up at the spring ain't the kind to sit down and mourn," said Bed-

rock. "Being my pardner, and half owner of the Mebbyso, you're free to come and go as you please. Me, I'm going to stick pretty close to the mine. A bullet would never get far in the tunnel. It's too crooked."

Convinced that the Henty boys had set fire to Wilson's cabin, and equally convinced that Wilson wouldn't sit with a lap full of trouble and stroke its back just to hear it purr, Young Hardesty wondered how long the Wilsons would stay, where would they go when they left, and what was likely to happen in the meantime. Of one thing he was sure. You didn't let anybody come bothering folks who were visiting you, especially when one of your visitors was a girl.

The following morning Wilson left camp on foot. Possibly Emily Wilson knew where he had gone, but she said nothing about it. Bedrock and his partner were working in the tunnel. The girl tidied up the lean-to, sanded the two skillets, gave the coffee-pot a much-needed rinsing, and after inspecting the commissary, planned the noon meal. When Bedrock and Young Hardesty appeared she had a fire going and the table set for three.

"Your dad feeling poorly?" said Bedrock, noting the three plates.

"No."

Bedrock washed up, an unusual proceeding at noon. Young Hardesty dug up a bit of broken comb and had a tussle with his hair. It was great not to have to rustle firewood and squat over a hot fire three times a day. He rather hoped the Wilsons' stay would be indefinite.

After the noon meal, Emily Wilson called for all the soiled clothing in camp. Bedrock fetched a length of rope and strung it up for a clothes-line.

"No fences here to dry 'em on," he said. "We dry 'em on the rocks. But I know how a woman likes to see 'em fluttering on a clothes-line."

About four Young Hardesty said he was going to knock off work.

"That girl will keep till evening," chuckled Bedrock.

"If you think I'm worryin' about any girl——" Young Hardesty shrugged and strode out of the tunnel.

When Bedrock showed up about five-thirty, neither Wilson nor Young Hardesty were in camp.

"That boy gone bee chasing?"

"He *said* he was going up the hill to look for another deer."

Bedrock and Emily Wilson waited until seven that evening, then had supper. When nine o'clock came and neither Wilson nor Young Hardesty appeared, Emily Wilson went up to the spring camp.

Bedrock prowled round the mine flat, occasionally glancing toward the hill trail. When ten o'clock came and Young Hardesty did not show up, he turned in.

ABOUT four-thirty that afternoon Young Hardesty was on the crest of the range. He had noted the tracks of high-heeled boots—Wilson's tracks made that morning. It wasn't natural for a cattleman to prowl over the hills on foot. Still, a man could keep under cover on foot easier than he could on a horse, and it was a sure bet Wilson wasn't showing himself if he could help it.

Young Hardesty sat his horse, gazing into The Other Valley. Down the slope a deer leaped a rock and disappeared into the brush. Almost instantly came the faint pop of a rifle. Maybe Wilson had gone out after meat. The sound of three more shots in rapid succession, knocked that idea out of Young Hardesty's head. Wilson was too good to have to waste all that ammunition on a buck.

Near the middle of the valley, far below, a tiny puff of smoke hung in the air. Again came the sound of a shot. This tiny puff of smoke, not bigger than a man's hat, was some distance away from the first. Another shot and a succeeding puff of smoke in still another location.

"Three guns goin'," muttered Young Hardesty. "Now I wonder who's doin' all that shootin'."

He recalled Bedrock's quiet hint to

keep out of trouble. The fact that he didn't know what was going on spurred his curiosity. With a glance at the sun, Young Hardesty headed down the mountainside.

Half-way down he was able to distinguish the form of a man lying behind a boulder on the valley floor. He could see the top of a black Stetson, and the glint of metal. Wilson wore a black sombrero. From across the dry river-bed in which the man in the black hat lay, came the report of a heavy calibre rifle. Immediately someone else fired from up the river-bed. The man in the black hat was standing off two rifles, one directly opposite him, the other to the right.

Young Hardesty calculated swiftly. The man directly west of Wilson was drawing his fire, while the other man, on the north, was creeping round to where he could get him from the side. Without stopping to reason, Young Hardesty put his horse down the slope.

Riding from one clump of brush to another, he got within hailing distance of Wilson when a sharp wind streaked past his head, followed by the crang of a rifle. He didn't waste any time dismounting. Tying his horse in the brush, he crept to a position directly back of Wilson.

"It's me, neighbour," yelled Young Hardesty. "Need any help?"

The besieged man turned his head.

"You better trot along home, kid."

"I'm just watching the fireworks," said Young Hardesty. He crept nearer, saw that Wilson was reloading his Winchester clumsily, using one hand. Young Hardesty cursed vigorously. They had got Wilson through the arm or shoulder. His left arm was useless. Slugs plunked into rock and ridge round Young Hardesty. It began to get so hot he knew he would have to either make for the hillside back of him or join Wilson behind the big boulder in the stream bed.

He wasn't any too eager to do either. It wasn't his fight. But he couldn't return to camp and tell Emily Wilson that he had seen her father, his arm crippled, standing off two men down in The Other Valley. He just couldn't do that. Wriggling along the stream-bed, he crawled up beside Wilson.

The cattleman had tied his handkerchief round his arm to stop the blood. He had taken off his hat. In it were eight or ten shells.

"All you got left?" said Young Hardesty. Wilson nodded.

There was no further talk. One by one Wilson used the shells, as the man up the river-bed kept creeping toward a spot from which he could get a clear shot. When down to three cartridges the cattleman stopped firing. Young Hardesty and he lay still, flat on the sand. A slug whistled over the boulder, fired from the man on the west. Young Hardesty's back tingled. He nudged Wilson.

The man on the north had crept round from behind a rock and was heading for another. Although he showed himself but a second, Wilson swung his rifle and fired. The man twitched, flattened on the sand and lay still.

"That kind of evens things up," said Wilson quietly. "Got a canteen on your saddle?"

"No. Feelin' poorly?"

"Not any too stout. How did you come to get into this, anyhow?"

"I was just lookin' around."

Wilson's face was sallow white and his eyes were heavy. He had lost a lot of blood.

"Pretty soon it will be dark enough to make a break. I got two shells left," he said dully.

Swiftly dusk settled over the valley. Familiar brush and boulder looked strange in the half-light. Realising that Wilson could never get back to camp on foot, Young Hardesty asked him if he could make it to his horse, a few hundred feet beyond them. The cattleman, who had sunk into a half-stupor, nodded.

"We better crawl," said Young Hardesty. "Mebby that fella across the wash ain't through yet. I'll pack your rifle. You'll need all the hands you got."

Noiselessly they started to crawl across the river-bed. Burdened with his

own rifle and Wilson's, Young Hardesty dragged himself along, the wounded man equally handicapped by his injured arm.

"Keep comin'," said Young Hardesty when they were about half-way across the river-bed. In the dusk he rose and made a dash for the clump of brush where his pony was tied. He was leading the horse back toward Wilson when he heard the clink of a shod hoof on the rocks. It was coming toward them. Young Hardesty's heart pounded. Another sound came to him, the faint scraping sound of Wilson painfully dragging himself across the sand. Beyond Wilson loomed a vague shape that seemed to move. Evidently aware that his enemy was trailing him, Wilson struggled up and began to run. A thin flame split the darkness. Wilson went down in a heap. Young Hardesty thought that the shot had got him. Dropping the reins, he ran toward the fallen man.

From the opposite direction came the horseman, swiftly now. He reined in, and began to fire. From the angle of the spurts of flame Young Hardesty saw that he was firing toward the ground, shooting at Wilson, who was already down and helpless.

Young Hardesty could never distinctly remember just what happened immediately after that. He knew that he had raised the rifle he carried, which happened to be Wilson's, and had thrown a shot at the man on the horse. Following a confused blur, the sound of a horse running, Young Hardesty had a vague recollection of having reached Wilson, who had not been hit a second time, but who had stumbled just as his enemy fired.

Now he was helping Wilson into the saddle. Young Hardesty led the horse up the slope from the river.

"Did you get him?" said Wilson in a high-pitched, feverish voice.

"I didn't get nobody," said Young Hardesty. "You been dreamin'."

After a long slow pull they reached the crest of the range. Young Hardesty stopped to breathe the pony. Immediately Wilson slumped from the saddle and lay in a heap on the ground. Young Hardesty slapped Wilson's face, revived him, and once more got him into the saddle.

"Just a short haul now, neighbour," he said. "She's all downhill. Hang on to the horn."

And so they came into camp. It was midnight. Emily Wilson was up and dressed. Bedrock got busy. Young Hardesty flung himself upon his cot and was asleep before anyone had a chance to question him.

EARLY that morning Young Hardesty was awakened by a sharp flash of lightning. Up in the hills thunder rolled and reverberated. A sudden wind twisted the tops of the brush above camp. Through the following silence came the patter of a few heavy raindrops. With a rush the storm came down. Rivulets formed and cut across the mine flat. Wilson, who was on a cot in the open, was moved to the mine tunnel. Emily Wilson came down from the spring camp in slicker and Stetson. She sat beside her father in the mine tunnel. Bedrock and Young Hardesty stuck it out in the lean-to. They had weathered many a heavy storm, but this was a cloudburst.

The morning was spent straightening up around camp. Wilson didn't want a doctor. He said a hole through his arm didn't amount to anything, that he had been used worse.

Bedrock finally got Young Hardesty aside and questioned him. Young Hardesty dodged the main issue by stating that the cloudburst had come just at the right time—it had washed out any tracks that might lead to trouble.

"Was you mixed up in that trouble?"

"I fetched Wilson home after he got hit," was all that Young Hardesty would say.

Bedrock was not greatly surprised when, about three that afternoon a Henty cowboy rode into the mine camp. Without preamble he said he was looking

for the man that had killed his boss and his boss's brother.

"Why did you come here?" said Bedrock quietly.

The cowboy gestured toward Emily Wilson. "I reckon her old man knows something about it."

Neither Emily Wilson nor Young Hardesty knew that both the Henty boys had been killed. Young Hardesty had fired at a figure in the dusk, had heard a horse running. Now he knew that both the Hentys were dead. He closed his teeth on the fact. The Henty hand wouldn't get any information from him. Bedrock himself showed no surprise. The Henty coyboy eyed the group belligerently. "Wilson around here anywhere?"

"He's in the mine tunnel, asleep," stated Bedrock.

The cowboy started toward the tunnel. Bedrock stepped in front of him. "You can talk to Wilson. But you better leave your gun with me."

"The hell I will!"

"Then you don't go in."

Bedrock was unarmed, but Young Hardesty had picked up his Sharp's.

"Private property. Keep out," he said with a hard grin.

The cowboy's face flamed as he glanced at Emily Wilson.

"If there wasn't a woman here——" he began, when Emily Wilson said gravely, "If I'm in the way, I'll be glad to go."

"It ain't necessary," stated Bedrock. "He's going to leave right now."

The Henty hand wasn't afraid, neither was he a fool. He had no authority to search the mine property. Swinging around, he stalked to his horse. With a final glance at the girl he turned and rode up the mountain trail.

THREE days later Sheriff Sam Overholt of Bowdry rode into the mine camp. With him was a deputy. He knew Bedrock and Young Hardesty well. He had not met Emily Wilson till then.

"Here's the idea," said Overholt, a stout, direct man with a quick brown eye. "Bob Henty and Bill have been killed. Somebody shot 'em. A couple of the Henty hands fetched their bodies into Bowdry. It was somebody packin' a forty-four did the job. Got any such shootin' iron in camp?"

Bedrock produced his own Winchester.

"It ain't been out of camp for over a month," he said, handing the rifle to the sheriff.

"I'll take your word for it. Anybody here been out of camp recent?"

"I have," said Young Hardesty. "The day before the cloudburst I was chousin' around The Other Valley when I run on to Wilson. He was layin' in the riverbed with a hole through his arm. I fetched him to camp."

"Is that all?"

"That was a plenty! It was all I could do to keep him from fallin' off Shingles."

"Shingles, eh? So you fetched him back on your pony?"

"That was the how of it."

"Who owns those three horses?"

"My father and I," said Emily Wilson.

"Then he must have been afoot when he got hit," said the sheriff.

"He was," said Young Hardesty.

"How's he gettin' along now?"

"First-class." Bedrock gestured toward the tunnel. "Want to talk to him?"

"That's what I came here for," stated Sheriff Overholt.

Young Hardesty immediately started up the trail toward the tethered horses.

The sheriff didn't say that previous to the killing the Henty Brothers had reported some illicit calf branding, and that Wilson had taken up land south of the Mebbyso mine. Nor did Overholt say that one of the Henty cowhands had reported the killing and charged Wilson with it. Overholt knew that ever since the Tonto Basin war, a feud had existed between the Hentys and the Wilsons. The Henty boys were wiped out. Wilson might be able to answer some questions.

"I'll go with you," said Emily Wilson as the sheriff and his deputy started toward the tunnel.

"Father," said Emily as they entered the tunnel, "it's Sheriff Overholt. He—"

Wilson's cot was empty. Swiftly Emily Wilson noted that her father's hat and rifle were not there. Her astonishment was evident.

"He must have heard us talkin'," said Overholt. "How far back does this tunnel go?"

"I've been through it. I'll get a candle and show you." If her father was hiding somewhere back in the tunnel and she went ahead of the sheriff, her father would not use his rifle. As they neared the end of the tunnel a draught of fresh air struck their faces. "That shaft there," said the girl, "leads to the open, south of us."

"We'll look, anyhow," said Overholt. "But I'm beginnin' to think I dropped in about a day too late."

They reached the opening on the southern hillside. Near it sat Young Hardesty solemnly counting some small change.

"How do you like our timberin'?" he said, gesturing toward the shaft.

The sheriff made no reply. He stood gazing at the ground. "Was it your horse he rode, or one of his own?" he gestured toward the fresh hoof tracks in the gravel.

"One of his own."

Emily Wilson glanced quickly at Young Hardesty. She had not known that he had engineered the escape—saddled up one of Wilson's horses while she and the officers were in the tunnel, and led it to the mouth of the shaft. Her eyes thanked Young Hardesty. Overholt eyed Young Hardesty shrewdly. "Joe, I didn't think you'd play that kind of a trick on me."

"If keepin' you from gettin' killed is a trick," stated Young Hardesty, "then I played her."

"I guess Wilson would have listened to me."

Young Hardesty shook his head. "If you'd tried to take him he'd killed you, sure as hell."

"How do you know?"

"He said so."

"Then," said Overholt, shrugging, "I guess he meant it."

When they returned to the camp Bedrock told them about the burning of Wilson's homestead. Overholt listened intently, questioned Emily Wilson, and finally, after a meal at the mine, departed. He and his deputy rode over the hill into The Other Valley. When they came to the fork in the trail that led to the Henty ranch, Overholt reined up. "Jack, we didn't have a thing on Wilson. It's dead open and shut that he did some brandin' that wasn't regular. And it's dead open and shut that the Henty boys burned him out. One of 'em took a shot at him when he was standin' in his doorway, so Bedrock tells me.

"Now I figure Wilson set out to get the Henty boys. But that cloudburst washed out all tracks. Whether they ambushed him or he ambushed them, don't matter. They had a fight. He got 'em both. Now he's headed south. I reckon there won't be any more killin' in The Other Valley for some time. Got any ideas on the subject?"

"Got one."

"Let's have it."

"That kid knows a whole lot more about the fight than he's going to tell."

"She's a fine lookin' girl," said Overholt. "And straight."

"I guess that settles it."

"No." Overholt gestured. "Any time I run on to Wilson I'm takin' him in, but I ain't ridin' to Mexico to get him. I reckon we best jog over to the Henty ranch and see the hands. Burns, who was so hot to get Wilson, needs talkin' to. I aim to tell him that if he monkeys around the Mebbyso, as long as that girl is there, he's likely to get hurt."

From the crest of the range Young Hardesty saw Overholt and his deputy pause at the fork in the valley trail and finally take the western branch. Wilson had ridden south. His last word to Young Hardesty had been, "Tell Emily I'm heading for Nogales." Reining around, Young Hardesty started down the hillside. Bedrock and the girl ceased

talking as he rode into camp.

"Your dad headed for Nogales," said Young Hardesty. "Sam Overholt and Jack took the trail to Henty's ranch."

"Then," said Bedrock, "I guess we'll have supper."

YOUNG HARDESTY was downhearted. He knew it would happen, but he had not expected that Emily Wilson would leave the morning after her father left. He argued that Overholt might be waiting for her to make just such a move, that he would follow her and locate her father.

"I'm not going to take Dad's trail," she said. "I'm going to take the road. It's longer, but it will be easier going." She had packed their few belongings on one of the horses, saddled the other. She was ready to leave. Young Hardesty gnawed his lower lip.

"I reckon you're goin'," he said slowly. He flushed. "Anyhow, I'm goin' to chouse along with you as far as Grant. We're plumb out of matches."

Bedrock's big white beard hid a smile. They might run short on flour, or bacon, but they were never out of matches.

Young Hardesty thought the five miles to Grant the shortest journey he had ever made. They hadn't talked much, he thinking of what he intended to say, the girl thinking about her father. Near the edge of town they drew up.

"I reckon I'll be saying good-bye now," declared Young Hardesty.

"Good-bye, Joe." The girl gave him her hand. Young Hardesty squeezed it, let go of it awkwardly.

"I almost forgot something." Young Hardesty's face was pale, his eyes over bright. He had been in some mighty tight corners, but this was the worst.

"Miss Wilson," he stammered, "I'm askin' you to marry me."

Some girls would have laughed, or at least smiled. Emily Wilson did neither. "That's nice of you, Joe. I sure like you a lot. But——"

"I ain't broke. I'm half-owner of the Mebbyso."

Emily Wilson nodded. "It isn't that. But I couldn't leave Dad. Then, I'm eighteen. You're sixteen. You're a mite young to think of getting married."

"Well, I been thinkin' of it, just the same," said Young Hardesty stubbornly.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you how much I appreciate your helping Father. I'm telling you now. From what he told me, you did a whole lot more for him than help him up on your horse, and fetch him back to the mine. But that's just between you and me."

"I reckon that's about all there is between us." Young Hardesty's tone was bitter.

"Don't say that, Joe. Maybe, someday, I'll meet you again. We'll both be older. Then things will look different to us."

"Shucks! You won't look any differen to me."

Emily Wilson smiled. "You're a good kid." She swung her horse, her hand on the lead rope of the pack horse. "So long, Joe. I won't forget."

Young Hardesty braced himself, sat straight in the saddle. He had lost out, but he wasn't going to show it.

"So long," he called, waving a cheerful farewell.

Again the girl turned as she rode, nodded toward the town of Grant. "Don't forget the matches."

Matches! Now if that wasn't just like a female! Always thinking of housekeeping and such, even when a fellow was telling her he liked her better than any girl in the world, and wanted to marry her. But, come to think of it, the right kind of girls always remembered about food and cooking and such things. Doggone all of 'em, anyhow!

It was a long five miles back. Young Hardesty allowed himself a day-dream. He had never known that a fellow could care so for a woman. Maybe, some day, he would meet Emily Wilson again and she would change her mind. He awakened from his dream to facts. He was here, on the mine road. Some day was a long way off, like The Other Valley.

KING OF THE BORDER BADMEN

By O. RANDAL DANE

SLIM fingers deftly building a wheat-straw smoke, Bill King lounged in the saddle and musingly surveyed the broad range which a twist in the tortuous trail had brought into view.

Miles of rich cattle country, studded here and there with the dobe dots of ranches, stretched away to the notched wastes of the saw-toothed San Fernando hills. His eyes, set in a face which was somehow boyish despite a certain hardness about it, narrowed slightly as he glimpsed those distant hills.

The Devil's Playground, they called that eroded badland. It was a region of a thousand erratic arroyos and gorges, almost inaccessible, home of a hundred hideouts for the lobo crew that sometimes frequented it. South of it sprawled Mexico. A wanted man could drift across the line while lawmen were combing the stony wastes of its sun-parched foothills.

For a long moment Bill King sat and studied his first view of the Las Cuevas cattle country, absently curbing the impatience of his mount, a fast-looking black gelding that was fretting at the delay.

Suddenly a tremor shot through the black. Battling the bit, he swerved and pitched in an explosion of panic. Sheering through the heat-drenched silence had come a sound that is always shocking to man and beast alike—the rasping snarl of a rattler's cascabels.

For a moment Bill King was fully occupied in subduing the black. Then his keen ears caught the sound of other hoofs. He twisted backwards in the saddle, the ligaments in his out-thrust jaw hard at what he saw.

Rocketing wildly around a curve in the narrow trail behind, rushing towards him at a reckless rate of speed, came a horse and rider. The horse, a green pinto colt, had the bit squarely between his teeth, and the rider, now utterly at the mercy of his unreasoning whim, was a slender girl.

She was in deadly peril. The narrow trail, precariously hugging the scant canyon bench, had no protection from the sheer drop which lay to one side. A slip would spell instant annihilation. And at the speed at which the terrified colt was careering, not even a miracle could prevent him from plunging off it at the sharp, right-angled bend that lay a scant two hundred feet ahead.

Bill King's lazy ease exploded into instant action. The gelding leaped forward as rowels raked his flankes. In the same instant the reins were let fall to his neck. Guiding him by the pressure of the knees alone, King poised tense in the saddle, sinews flexing for the feat he had to attempt.

As the runaway drew level, he suddenly leaned outwards. Beneath his shirt, muscles writhed like angered snakes. His arms closed about the girl, lifting her. For fraught seconds they thundered stirrup to stirrup, doom riding on every hoof-beat. Then the mutinous colt was running free as a final sinew-wrenching effort lifted her from her saddle and across his own. The black galloped on a few more yards, then slid to a stop as the pressure on his reins was taken up again.

The cobalt eyes which Sally Brandon lifted warmly to her rescuer clouded suddenly as a horrible piercing scream knifed the echoes. The terrified colt had taken the bend too fast. She shuddered. Had it not been for this good-looking, reckless-riding young stranger she would have shared a similar fate on the splintered rocks a thousand feet below.

"I—I hardly know how to begin thanking you——" she began.

Even white teeth showed in a boyish smile.

"Forget it, please," he urged. "Anyone would have done the same, Miss——" He hesitated.

"Brandon," she supplied, "Sally Brandon."

He stared down at her in frank admiration. Levis and a spotless white shirt revealed the lithe perfection of her vibrant young body. She was little over twenty, he judged. Wind and sun had tinted her oval face olive. The red of her lips was the natural colour of healthy youth. Tendrils of corn-coloured hair caught myriad hues from the sun. He could not remember when he had seen such an attractive girl.

As his frankly-admiring gaze met hers a faint pink warmed the olive of her cheeks. Next instant a second rider came whirling into view around the bend in the trail.

"Sally!" he exclaimed anxiously, pitching from his saddle as his bronc skidded to a dust-showering stop. "Are you all right? I saw the colt bolt, but I was too far back to do anything."

He was a slim young fellow about a year younger than the girl, and with the same cobalt eyes and corn-hued hair. She smiled reassuringly at him.

"I'm okay, Tad," she said. "Thanks to Mr. ——" Her glance questioned.

"The name is King," drawled the stranger. "Bill King—from the Pecos Valley."

A tiny frown knit her arched brows. The name seemed to stir a faint chord in her memory, yet she was sure she had never seen this straight featured, confident-looking young stranger before.

"Thanks to Mr. King I escaped with my life. Mr. King, this is my brother, Tad."

Tad Brandon turned abruptly to the man on the black.

"Gee, I'm sure grateful to you, Mr. King," he began warmly. Abruptly, his eyes became chill. He was noticing the other's appearance for the first time. Something in that lean, grey-eyed face and the sight of the twin-black guns that rode in tied-down holsters on either thigh, combined to give him a curiously uneasy feel-

ing. Tad Brandon was young, but he had lived all his life in the cattle country, and he knew that this two-gun stranger was no drifting waddy looking for a thirty-dollars-a-month job. Once or twice he had seen men like him, quiet, confident-mannered men who were never pugnacious, but whose eyes told of the iron that was in their souls. Even as the thought flashed to his mind, he remembered where he had heard the name, "Pecos" Bill King before. That piece in the *Del Oro Gazette* a week ago. . . .

In that moment Tad Brandon found himself wishing that it had been one of a thousand others who had saved his sister's life.

"My sister and I are extremely grateful to you, suh," he finished stiffly.

Sally gave him a swift look. She had noticed the sudden chill that had crept into his manner. It was not like Tad to act like this. She felt a little surge of impatience. He could have put a little more warmth into his words. The stranger had risked his own life in saving hers. She smiled at King.

"If you are travelling towards Las Cuevas, perhaps you would accept the hospitality of the Lazy B?" she invited. "It is only a mile farther on."

Bill King's grey eyes met and held hers.

"I'd sure admire to," he drawled. Somehow, she tore her gaze away, flushing a little. She was being ridiculous, she told herself, reading anything but polite friendliness in the queerly enigmatic eyes of this stranger from the Pecos Valley. And yet those eyes seemed to have done something to her. It was as though she had taken a draft of potent, heady old wine. Life had suddenly seemed to have become incredibly sweet. As though for the first time she was aware of the beauty of the world about her. The miles of lush plain, the wide arch of cloudless sky, the sage that spiced the evening breeze, all seemed to have taken on an added beauty.

Tad's voice cut in on her.

"Here, take Lonesome, Sally," he said shortly. "I'll walk."

Tad Brandon's face grew more sullen as the trail widened out and King moved his black up until he was riding stirrup to stirrup with the girl. Dull anger crawled through Tad as he clumped stiffly behind them on his high-heeled boots. He was remembering what he had read in the *Del Oro Gazette*. "Pecos" Bill King was a man with a price on his head. He was a lobo, an owl-hoot rider, who lived by bartering his gun-speed to the highest bidder. Back on the Pecos he had blazed a lurid chapter of rangeland history. In the Logan-Kane cattle war just ended there he had earned a trio of notches for his black-hafted guns—the last a cold-blooded killing that had slapped a sheriff's sticker against his name. And this was the man who had saved his sister!

Impotence mocked young Brandon. Cow-country code checked him when hot words hung on his lips. Despite what he knew about King, hospitality forbade his making an issue of it yet.

The rambling corrals and buildings of the Lazy B nestled in a fold of the lush range. Presently they were passing beneath the arched gate of its yard.

A trio of riders were halted before the veranda of the adobe ranch-house. At sight of them Tad Brandon exclaimed angrily:

"It's that Bart Sprowl again, Sally!" he grated. "Can't that hombre ever take no for an answer?"

On the steps of the shaded stoop a tall raw-boned man with a weather-beaten face was standing, squarely facing the horsemen. They were hard-looking, cold-eyed men, whose well-kept hands betrayed little evidence of toil. All three wore guns.

One in particular stood out from the rest. He was a lean hatchet-faced man, whose high shoulders and sloping features somehow contrived to give him the appearance of a wily, predatory wolf.

"Well, what do yuh say, Brandon?" the latter was demanding harshly. "I came to git an answer to my proposition."

There was a hint of restrained anger in the cattleman's tones as he replied:

"Yuh know my answer, Bart Sprowl. I told yuh twict befoh', and there isn't any

chance of my changin' my mind. I ain't aimin' to sell the Lazy B."

Bart Sprowl's beady gaze travelled past the rancher. A slow light smouldered in his eyes as they roved lingeringly over Sally's curves. She stiffened in her saddle, felt her cheeks redden. With a long look that somehow was more insulting than any mere words could have been, he reluctantly turned back to her father.

"Listen, Brandon," he said harshly. "Yuh're actin' plump foolish. The Las Cuevas Land and Cattle Company offered yuh a right handsome price foh yuhr spread an' if yuh're wise yuh'll grab it."

"I ain't aimin' to sell," repeated Dan Brandon doggedly. "An' even iffen I was. it wouldn't be to the Las Cuevas Land an' Cattle Company—meanin' yuh. Yuhr fancy-named outfit ain't nothin' but a pirate spread, Bart Sprowl. It came into this country with only a brandin'-iron and a loose-loop foh assets. The hired gun-slingers and rustlers on its pay-roll near ruined most of the small ranchers. All of 'em had plasters stuck on 'em since the slump, an yuh bought up those papers, fohclosin' when the notes fell due. They ain't no mortgage sticker on this outfit, Sprowl, so them methods ain't gunna buy yuh the Lazy B. Git that straight."

Bart Sprowl's narrow shoulders lifted in a patient shrug. Somehow, he contrived to give the impression of a wolf philosophically waiting for the victim it knows must inevitably fall to its fangs.

"Harsh words won't buy yuh anythin', Brandon," he said lazily. "The water on yuh're holding is vital to the Company's projects. I'm givin' yuh another twelve hours to make up yohre mind to act reasonable."

"I don't need no twelve hours, Bart Sprowl," stated the rancher. "Dynamite wouldn't change my mind in this. I ain't sellin'."

Sprowl nodded to his companions, put spurs to his bronc. He twisted in his saddle for a parting shot.

"Yuh'll sell," he said, with smug confidence. "Or——"

An unvoiced threat hung in the wake of the departing riders. Dan Brandon stood staring after them with grim lines etched about his taut mouth. Then as he turned and caught sight of Sally hurrying to his side he forced a smile.

"Why, uh, hello, Sally. Back already? I was just havin' a—uh-huh—business talk with the manager of the Las Cuevas Land an' Cattle Company."

"Father!" Her voice was taut as she flung the word at him. "I heard some of what that man Sprowl said. He's bad. It's going to be like it was with other small outfits on this range. Cattle will be run off. Our riders will be bushwhacked. It will be war!"

Dan Brandon heaved a tired sigh. He couldn't keep the grim knowledge from her for long. Perhaps it was as well that they should all face the facts now.

"Yuh're right, honey," he said sadly. "It's gunna be—war." His gaze travelled to Tad. "We'll have to tell the boys. It's only fair. Any of them that decide to stay will have to pack guns all the time from now on."

Tad nodded. "Some of 'em 'll stick," he said grimly. "And some of 'em 'll ask for their pay pronto when they hear Sprowls outfit is buying cards in the hand. You can't blame 'em too much, either," he went on savagely. "They're cow-pokes, not profesh. gun-slingers, like half of the Land an' Cattle Company hands."

His eyes, half-veiling their enmity, travelled to the silent King. Sally's glance suddenly sought the same target.

"Bill!" she said, unconscious of her adoption of the stranger's first name in the stress of the impulse that had suddenly actuated her. "Are you looking for a job?"

Bill King's grey gaze met and held hers for a long moment. Queer lights seemed to be shifting in their depths. She could read no expression on his stiffened face.

"I'm sorry, Miss Brandon," he said at last, enunciating each word slowly. "But —I'm ridin' on!"

The strained silence that somehow fell was broken by Tad's curt laugh. His eyes,

openly hostile now, locked with King's.

"You forget that we are already deeply in debt to Mr. King, sis," he said, thinly-veiled sarcasm in his tones. "To ask him to toss those tied-down guns of his against an outfit as big and powerful as Sprowl's would hardly be fair to him . . . or convenient, perhaps."

There was a little hush. With a startled catch in her throat, Sally saw the abrupt tensing of the stranger's frame, saw the eyes that swiftly slitted and became two ice-flecked pools—saw clearly too, for the first time, the twin black guns that hugged his sides. The significance of Tad's allusion to tied-down holsters struck her with sudden force. In the South-west, when a man wears his guns like that, it means only one thing. His need of them is so great he can't afford the handicap of the split-second difference a draw from loose scabbards might mean. Now, too, the queer, half-tangible memory that first mention of Bill King's name had inspired, became crystallised in stunning realisation. A week ago, in the *Del Oro Gazette* . . .

She stepped swiftly between the two. Tad possesed a hot, hair-trigger temper that might betray him into a situation only snarling six-guns could untangle.

As abruptly as it had come, the tension that had traced itself through King vanished. With a queer little smile he stepped back and doffed his Stetson.

"Your brother is right, Miss Brandon," he said slowly. "Just now such a course would not be . . . convenient."

He spun on his spurred heels. Dragging rowells chimed down the stoop steps. Hoof-beats swelled in the ranch yard, grew dim, died away.

SHADOWS were dyeing the hollows when Bill King, still with a keen remembrance of a lovely face framed in shimmering, corn-hued hair, rode into a camp of the Las Cuevas Land and Cattle Company. Spluttering bacon beside an open blaze where a fat Chino cook was busy with pots and skillets, lent a savoury aroma to the air. The glow of the flickering flames from the burning mesquite lit the lean faces of the dusty riders who sprawled at indolent ease. He became conscious of the impact of hot unfriendly glances. They were a hard-looking crew, these Company riders. King had a shrewd hunch that an outlaw round-up on the Las Cuevas range would have left Bart Sprowl's spread shy a lot of cow-hands.

A lolling rider grudgingly pointed out the foreman. The latter, a squat individual with a hawk-like face, looked up without friendliness as Bill King braced him for a job. His hard gaze softened a shade as he noted the guns in the tied-down holsters.

"Wheah yuh punch 'em last?"

"Rode some down Pecos way," drawled Bill King.

The foreman's gaze travelled him speculatively. Approval grew in his hard eyes.

"Well, Pecos," he said at length. "Yuh done got a job. Thutty a month an' beans. Keep yuhr string sweated up an' stay shy of Flip Drago an' yuh might last to cash a pay cheque."

"Uh huh."

A battered skillet gonged.

"Clome an' glet it befo' I thlow it out!" sang the cook.

King slid hackamore and hull from the gelding and followed the others as they lifted tin plates from a pile. There was little of the jovial camaraderie of the average cow-camp about this spread, he saw. They were a mean, hard bunch, and a prudent man would have thought twice before picking an argument with any of them.

Head and shoulders above the rest towered the man he learned was the Flip Drago the foreman had warned him to stay shy of. He was a hulk of a man, modelled on simian lines, with long arms and a corded neck that rose solidly from heavy shoulders. He had a hooked nose, eyes that suggested the play of winter sun on snow, and a thin mouth that was fashioned into a permanent sneer. Crossed gun-belts sagged at either hip with the weight of notched 45's.

Tough as they were, the rest of that

crew seemed inclined to give him plenty of leeway. Once a rider, returning to his place with a second helping of beans, inadvertently trod against Drago's outsprawled foot. Instantly, with a speed that was surprising in one of his bulk, Drago was erect, hands claw-like above his hips. He spat at the clumsy puncher an epithet that anywhere in the West spells fight.

The cowboy winced under the sting of it, but he forced a placating smile.

"Aw, Flip," he whined. "Yuh know I didn't mean it. Honest, it was only an accident."

Carefully keeping his hand well away from the vicinity of his gun, he retreated from the cursing giant. He dropped to his heels beside King.

"Some day that hellion is gunna stop a lotta lead!" he spat beneath his breath.

Faint scorn tinged Bill King's reply.

"You got a gun."

"Yeah? I suppose yuh would of thrown one if it hadda been yuh?" sneered the puncher. "Lemme tell yuh somepin'. That gorilla has gun-whipped ten times faster hombres than me. He's hopped up on marajuanna half the time an' is just honin' foh a chanct to throw lead. I seed bad men along this Bordeh, but that Drago is a walk-home winner in the hellion stakes. He's blood crazy. The hull outfit here is scared of him. And we ain't no Sunday School outing. Everybody jumps through the hoops when Flip Drago tells 'em—an' yuh better do the same, cowboy, if yuh wanna spend any L an' C dough."

"Down on the Pecos," drawled King, "we don't jump through no hoops for nobody."

"Down on the Pecos," snarled the rider, "yuh don't git guys like Flip!"

His supper finished, King got to his feet and, following cow camp custom, walked over to the cook fire with his dishes. As he passed the sprawled Drago he noticed that the latter was also getting to his feet. He paid scant heed to that at the moment and deposited his plate on the growing pile. As he turned to retrace his steps, Flip Drago barged into him.

The gunman sprang back from the impact with a snarl. Profanity, filth-laden, drooled from his lips.

"Who the hell yuh think yuh are?" he spat. "I got a mind to gut-shoot yuh for that."

Bill King's voice carried to the farthest watching puncher.

"Any time you feel that way—start tryin'."

A swift change had come over him. The eyes with which he returned Drago's infuriated gaze were as bleak and wintry as Flip's own. He stood in a half crouch, arms slightly bent, both hands flat with the forefingers looped wide from the palm.

Men got to their feet. Ace gun-fighters are rare. And most of them instantly recognised that here were two of them on the brink of action.

Blood lust blinded Drago to the menace of that sudden crouch, the quick icy flame in slitted eyes that had tipped the watchers. Just another fresh puncher, he thought, and made his play.

He was fast, that Flip Drago, lightning fast—but he wasn't fast enough.

His guns were scraping leather before King moved. Then all the watchers saw was a blur. In twin snapping motions, too quick for the eye to follow in detail, his black guns were out and crouched on outthrust hips, talking.

A scream knifed their cough. Flip Drago swayed, went backward, crumpled. He landed on his face. Notched 45's slid from his hands. He never moved again.

There was something akin to awe on the foreman's face as he stalked forward. He had seen fast gun-play in his time, but the blindingly swift precision with which this lean youth had beaten Drago to the draw was as fast as any he had ever seen.

"Pecos," he said admiringly. "Yuh sure throw a brace of speedy smoke poles, what I mean. That hombre yuh just gave seconds to an' beat had a rep. a yard wide. A gun-slinger of yuhr talents is plumb wasted in a cow camp.

Bart Sprowl could use yuh in Las Cuevas. How would mebbe two hundred bucks a month sound to yuh, Pecos?"

King reholstered his smoking guns. A hard smile moved his lips.

"Two hundred bucks listens good," he drawled. "But there might be snags. They got law in Las Cuevas, I hear."

The foreman laughed.

"I might of guessed yuh mebbe mightn't be cravin' too much publicity. But don't worry none about the law in that town. There's a deputy sheriff that don't know which side his molasses is on, but I guess Bart Sprowl can take care of his boys. Don't let that end of it phase yuh. Yuh can ride on into town to-morrow. Stop at the Black Casa an' ask for Bart. Tell him I sent yuh. Yuh got work ahead of yuh, Pecos—an' I don't mean punchin' cows!"

IN Spanish "casa" means house, and the Black Casa, unofficial headquarters of the Land and Cattle Company at Las Cuevas was just what its name implied—a house of black and evil repute. Here, at one time or another, some of the worst characters along the Border appeared. Outlaws, escaped convicts, rustlers, professional gunmen—the grapevine of the lobo trail whispered that all were assured of a warm welcome at the Black Casa.

To it rode Bill King as the noon sun was blistering the lethargic cow town. Slowly he anchored his black to the hitch-rack. Trailing spuri rowels tinkling musically, he stalked into the saloon.

Smoke hung like a pall. Dimly visible through it were lounging men, hard-faced individuals whose most noteworthy characteristic was a quality of chill, watchful calm. All wore guns.

Calculating eyes drilled Bill King's back as he strode to the bar.

"The foreman at Camp Three sent me," he said in low tones.

The bar-tender, a corpulent Mex with three sagging chins, lifted a flap in the counter and jerked a grimed thumb towards a low door.

Bart Sprowl was seated at a chipped desk in the low-ceiled room beyond. His beady eyes roved King in sinister approval.

Even without the two black guns that rode the oil slick, tied down holsters, he flattered himself he would have known the type. The czar of the Las Cuevas range had known many such quiet, cold-mannered men whose chief stock-in-trade was a lightning proficiency in throwing lead.

"Hello, Pecos," he purred. "The foreman sent me word of what happened last night. I can use a fast gun-tosser like yuh, King——" He broke off, his lids narrowing slightly. "Say, didn't I see yuh out at the Brandon ranch yesterday?"

"Uh-huh." King was smiling a little. "I listened to your spiel, and when they offered me a job afterwards I had savvy enough to turn it down."

Sprowl's rasping laugh was requiem for any doubts he might have been toying with.

"A smart-money player, huh?" he said knowingly. "I can see yuh an' me is gunna get along swell. Yuh got savvy, nerve an' speed. Yuh look gosh awful young to have carved the kinda rep the *Del Oro Gazette* gave yuh, but I guess yuh must of started in early. Well, what do yuh say to two hundred a month an' no questions asked?"

"You've hired a man," drawled King.

"An' two guns," added Sprowl meaningly. He got to his feet. "C'mon an' meet the boys. We were just goin' for a little ride an' yuh might as well tag along an' git acquainted." He hesitated. "Might be a little job to-night too."

King shrugged.

"Kayo with me."

Sprowl nodded and stepped out into the dim-lit cantina.

"Meet Pecos Bill King, fellas. Yuh know, the hombre that raised such Cain down that way a piece back. He's got two grand on his head—but I'd sure hate to be the hairpin that tries to collect it. All right. We're ridin'."

As they swung from the Black Casa a

voice arrested them. A buckboard had just veered into the dusty street and the driver had abruptly halted her team at sight of Sprowl and his riders.

"What have you done with my father?" she cried, fear in her choked tones.

"Why, Miss Sally, what do yuh mean?" There was well-simulated surprise in Bart Sprowl's voice. "Has somethin' happened to yuhr paw? I'm real sorry to hear that."

The avid little flames in his hungry eyes as they quested over her trim form belied the kindness of his voice. She choked back a sob.

"You know what I mean!" she challenged. "You've kidnapped him, you and your hired killers——"

She broke off. She had just caught sight of King.

"You!" she breathed, a look of infinite scorn wiping the surprise from her flushed face.

Somehow, the thing added to her pain. She did not know what was the matter with her, but since that reckless young stranger had ridden into her life, she had been aware of a curious change. She had found herself repeatedly thinking of him, and had hated herself for it. He was nothing better than a cheap killer, she told herself, and then had quarrelled with Tad when he had said the same. She had tried to ignore the damning testimony of the grim story in the Del Oro paper, had sought excuses for his refusal of a job at the Lazy B, tried to persuade herself that he was not really bad. And now here was shocking proof that she had been wrong and Tad was right. Bill King had gone on from the Lazy B and thrown in with the man whose declared intention was to ruin them, and whom she felt morally certain was the agency responsible for her father's disappearance.

Bart Sprowl picked up his reins.

"Don't worry none about yuhr paw," he purred, veiled mockery in his voice. "He'll turn up some time."

He spurred his bronc viciously. The cavalcade swept forward again.

Her lovely face strained and white, Sally Brandon leaned from the buckboard and stared after them with tortured eyes.

"Don't you dare to hurt him, Bart Sprowl!" she cried, a broken sob in her choked throat. "Don't you dare!"

A sardonic laugh and the thud of receding hoofs was the mocking answer.

TAD BRANDON stiffened in his saddle and peered intently into the gloom that enshrouded the Devil's Playground. He had a hunch that he was near the end of the trail. For a long spell he tarried in the shadow of a splintered mesa and watched. His lids narrowed suddenly. He could see it again now, a dim spiral against the moonlit sky. Smoke!

He slid from the saddle, anchored his bronc to the ground. He eased forward, stiffened abruptly. A sound had rasped the silence—a boot-heel striking a loose stone. At the same moment the black outline of a sombreroed head showed against the sky.

Tad Brandon worked fast. From his saddle he slipped his lariat, built a loop. Twice he whirled it cautiously to get the feel of the throw. Then he made the cast.

The whirling riata sped true. The sentinel heard a little hiss. He opened his mouth to yell, but the coils that snapped taut about his neck with sinuous accuracy choked off utterance. He crashed head on into the crag beside him without saying a word. Two minutes later he was lying gagged and bound.

Tad surveyed the scene below him in grim silence. Beneath, in a cup-shaped depression in the eroded rocks, a fire was burning, its fitful flames throwing the figures of Bart Sprowl's gunmen into wavering relief. His face hardened at the sight, grew thoughtful as he noted the small shack that stood a little to one side. The hunch that had led him to pick up Sprowl's trail and follow it with the dogged persistence of a Yaqui all afternoon was working stronger than ever now. Hugging the shadows that glutted one side of the depression, he inched for the hut. A voice drifted from it as he came near.

"I'm givin' yuh one more hour, Brandon. If yuh haven't decided to sign by then I'll turn my men loose on the Lazy B." The voice crackled with splenetic mirth. "I don't hafta draw a diagram to tell yuh what that means, do I?"

The door of the shack opened. Sprowl stiffened on the threshold as he sighted Tad. He cursed. His hand flashed with the speed of a snake striking. Steel glinted in the moonlight.

Tad Brandon was no gunman. His hand had a long way to travel before he could snap the six-gun tucked in his waistband to an effective level. Death would be on its way to him before that.

A man came around the corner of the shack. He spoke coldly.

"Turn your gun this way, Sprowl."

It was King. The slender rider stood on wide-stretched feet, arms hooked just enough to bring his hands above the black butts of his heavy guns.

Profanity spewed from Sprowl. He spun fast on his heel, six-gun slanting in a brief arc. It spoke once, deafeningly. King's hands blurred. Flame, smoke thickened, gouted from his hips. Burnt cordite tinged the air.

Out of the welter of smoke and flame Tad and King came erect and unhurt. On the ground, Sprowl stayed still. King spoke curtly.

"Snap it up. I'll manage this mob."

Down by the fire pandemonium had broken loose. Men scattered from it fast, quested with belching guns. Lead beat the air about King. A bullet bit a hole in his white Chihuahua hat, lifted it sideways. One black gun balanced on outthrust hip slanted, toppled a man. Sprowl's men were spreading fanwise. Their fire came faster, closer. A cocha on King's bat-wing chaps dissolved in silver splinters. A man went down, another.

Firing pins clicked on empty chambers. Realisation douched King. Empty guns—and three men still left. A slug incised a burning track across his cheek.

Behind him, another gun spoke. Brittle flame slammed lead past him. A queer smile quirked Bill King's lips. He jabbed fresh shells into his hot guns as Tad Brandon's enthusiastic if erratic marksmanship contributed to the clamour. Then he was wheeling his big guns again, tearing hell out of the remaining members of Bart Sprowl's mob. His irons sang lobo requiem for the final smashing of the Sprowl spread's dominion on the Las Cuevas range.

Where, later, their ways split, Tad Brandon let his father move on ahead and looked King straight in the eye.

"Mexico's a good country for a rider," he said evenly.

King's eye met his and held them.

"I've heard that too," he drawled.

"A man could wipe the slate and start fresh there."

"There is a rumour to that effect, too," agreed Bill King.

The eyes of the two locked In each was a genuine respect for the other's courage. Both had been tried in a crucible where only raw nerve counted, and neither had been found wanting.

A welter of emotions was churning in Tad. This cool, soft-voiced stranger from the Pecos Valley was a being of baffling contradictions. The papers had painted him as a ruthless killer. The fact that he had refused a job on the Lazy B and thrown in with the Sprowl spread seemed to verify that. By his very actions since coming to the Las Cuevas range this slender young rider scarce two years older than himself had advertised the fact that he was a professional gunman, a lobo ready to barter his uncanny speed to the highest bidder.

Yet he had saved Sally's life at the risk of his own, and had it not been for his recent, amazing defiance of Bart Sprowl and his henchmen, Tad would at this moment be lying dead, and his father still a helpless prisoner.

Tad Brandon gave it up. The man with the two black guns was a complete mystery.

He spoke to King once more, and there

was a curious, strained inflexion about his tones.

"I want to tell you something, Pecos. I hate every hair on the hide of the man who'll sell his guns to the highest bidder. A professional lead-thrower is lower than a side-winder's belly to me. But I got to admit this, King. You're sand clear through to the backbone. When it comes to guts—you got what it takes!"

A queer smile hung about Bill King's lips.

"I'd like to tell you something too, kid. You'll do to ride the river with. Adios."

And King was gone.

SALLY BRANDON reined in her pony in the shadow of a mesa. A horseman was coming towards her, and when any chance rider might be a henchman of the powerful Sprowl, it behoved her to act with caution. She was a long way from the Lazy B. She had swapped the buckboard for a saddle-horse and ridden to Durango, the county seat. There the sheriff had not been over impressed by her story of her father's disappearance. He pointed out that the fact that he had been missing only a matter of hours scarcely warranted his intervention yet. And he had a deputy at Las Cuevas. Sally knew this, but she had not too much faith in Jeff Waters. The man was honest enough, she knew, but in the face of the influence the Land & Cattle Company wielded in the town, it was foolish to expect him to do too much. She finally wrung a promise from the sheriff that if her father failed to show up by morning he would ride over and look into the affair himself.

The oncoming horseman rode into a zone of moonlight. With a sudden hammering of her pulses she saw who it was. Sally made a grim decision then. She drew the small pistol she carried for rattlers and waited tensely for the rider to draw level with her.

It was not easy to go through with this thing, she found, but thought of her father steeled her for the effort. As the man on the black drew level she spurred from the shadows.

"Grab clouds, cowboy!" she called, her voice steadier than she had hoped. Moonlight glittered on the tiny gun she held with grim precision on a dead line with his heart.

Bill King started at the sudden interruption, half went into his fighting crouch. He relaxed abruptly as he saw who it was. His hands lifted slowly. There was a hint of reckless laughter in his eyes.

"Where is my father?" demanded the girl, forcing her voice to stay steady.

"Safe at the Lazy B by this time, I think, Miss Sally." His voice was easy. "He escaped from—uh—our clutches."

Sally fought for self-control.

"Bill King," she made herself say. "You saved my life yesterday, but I think you forfeited my gratitude when you deliberately threw in with the man who is out to ruin my father." Her voice broke a little, became purposeful again. "It is my duty to take you into Las Cuevas and turn you over to the deputy sheriff there!"

King's lips moved in a twisted grin.

"Okay, Miss Sally. Let's ride!"

But she did not immediately move to do so. A look of sudden despair crossed her oval face with its cobalt eyes and framing aureole of soft, corn-coloured hair. She seemed to be struggling for words, finally found them.

"Oh, Bill, I—I can't do it. Turn and ride for the Border. In Mexico you'll be safe. Only give up this terrible gun-fighting. It's a pity that a man like you should be a professional gunman. I know there's heaps of good in you, Bill King. Give it a chance. Turn over a new leaf there. Will you, Bill—for me?"

Her eyes were very soft, pleading, a hint of pain, too, in their limpid depths. She looked very wistful as she sat there in the moonlight, dainty and fresh in her tan-coloured riding-breeches and white shirt.

Queer lights shifted in the depths of King's grey eyes.

"That's the second time to-night Mexico has been recommended to me, Miss Sally," he drawled. "Only this time I'm afraid the suggestion has come too late. The deputy sheriff is here now."

An icy hand clutched at Sally Brandon's heart. Startled, she stared at the rider whose approach she had failed to notice. It was Jeff Waters. About the man was a certain tenseness, as though his body was a coiled spring, ready any instant to be released.

She felt the blood ebb from her face. What was going to take place between these two—the lobo and the lawman? Would Bill King, true to his reckless desperate reputation, risk all on one wild snatch for his black-butted guns?

She saw with a shock that Jeff Waters was leaning forward in the saddle, hands poised for the swoop of his guns. The threat of death was stamped on his unsmiling, hard-jawed face. The air was electrified with a grim forecast of imminent bloodshed. Four deadly weapons were awaiting the grip of impatient fingers.

"Hoist 'em, Pecos! High an' fast!" Tension tightened the officer's voice.

Sally caught her breath. And then a relief that had pain in it too flooded her. Slowly, a ghost of a smile hanging on his lips, Bill King was obeying. Something tugged at her heart-strings. It looked like the end of the trail for this slender boyish rider whose coming had somehow changed everything for her.

"Slip the irons from his holsters, Miss Brandon," came the deputy's taut tones.

"Maybe it's for the best, Bill," she whispered as she complied. Yet she didn't believe that.

"While you're relieving me of the hardware, Miss Sally," came King's soft drawl. "You'll find a piece of tin in my shirt pocket. Mind giving it to the deputy?"

Moonlight glittered on a silver star. Incised letters danced before her eyes. She stared at King for a wordless moment.

"A U.S. marshal!" she breathed. "But the story in the *Del Oro Gazette*——"

"Was true. Only the real Pecos King is behind bars. I only borrowed his identity to get in with the men who had fractured a couple of Federal laws in their looting of the Las Cuevas range. That was why I refused the job on the Lazy B."

He turned to the deputy.

"Sprowl is dead. Most of his gunmen too. You'll find them in the Devil's Playground, alongside the two mesas that look like an Indian and his squaw. I'm turning the rest of the job over to you. Right now, I'm . . . busy."

Jeff Waters showed that he could take a hint.

Alone with the starry-eyed Sally again, a subtle change had come over the man she knew as King. The same defiance was in his square jaw, but the hard air of the professional gun-fighter had dropped from him as though he had shed a cloak. In his grey eyes a curious warmth glowed.

"So many people have been trying to sell me Mexico lately, Sally," he said softly, "that I'm getting sort of mighty curious about the place. Do you think it would be all right for a short visit—like, say now, a honeymoon?"

The world seemed to stand still in a breathless hush. Then, somehow, tender arms were about her, and incredibly gentle lips were brushing the sweetness of her fragrant hair, her eyes, her lips. In a voice husked with emotion she found herself answering:

"I guess it would, cowboy—but shouldn't the girl know your name?"

"Our name," he smilingly corrected, and told her.

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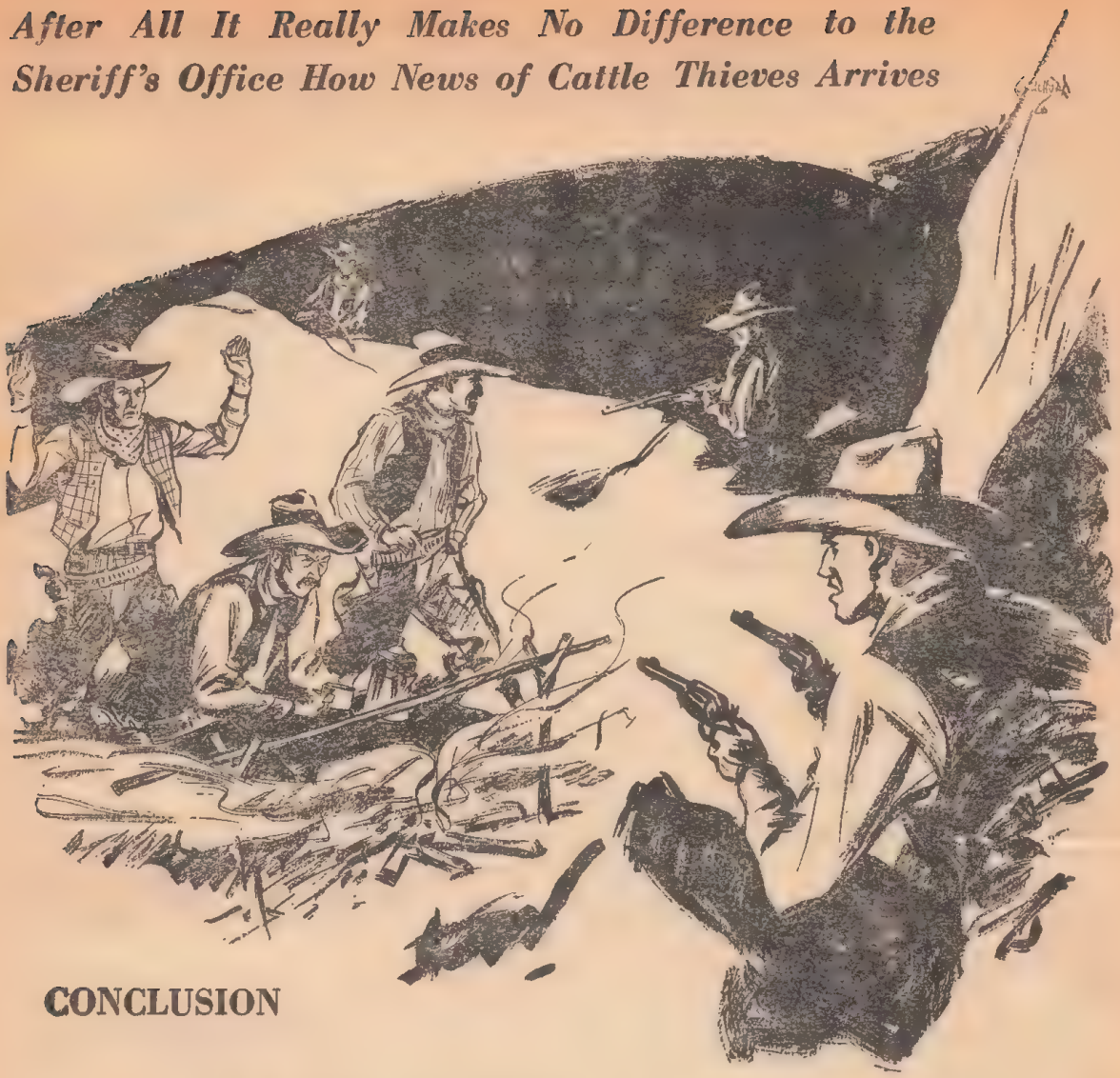


CONCLUSION

HOPALONG CASSIDY TAKES CARDS

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

Author of
"Hopalong Cassidy, Trail Boss," "On the Trail of the Tumbling T," etc.

XVIII

MESQUITE awakened, cooked his breakfast and then, with disguised caution, stepped out of the house, locked the door behind him, crossed the little yard, let himself into the stable and closed and locked the big rear doors after him. He rolled the front door open and then stepped back and placed his chair against a box stall about halfway down the building. He was ready for business or trouble, as the case might be, and while he waited for either or both he let his mind run over the events of the day before.

This was Monday, and by now Hankins should be at Whit's ranch, and by noon

the letter should be pretty close to a post office. He tried to follow the letter's journey, but gave it up as involving too much pure guesswork. All right, he was free from the responsibility of looking out for the old man, free to play the cards as they chanced to fall.

About mid-morning the harness maker stepped into his doorway and looked curiously at the stable office. He peered into the dim interior of the stable, shading his eyes with a hand to aid his vision. He thought he could see someone sitting on a chair halfway down the building. Yes, that was right; but he could not see who it was.

He hesitated for a moment and then rather reluctantly turned and disappeared into his shop.

Lunch time came around, but Mesquite hated to leave. That would mean that he would have to close and lock the big door of the stable, which might look suspicious to someone. If he left and did not lock it the box stalls might provide very excellent ambushes. He did not know that Dutch Bill had not passed on the disturbing news which old man Hankins had drunkenly told him at the little corral behind Dalton's saloon; that Dutch, intending to take care of the matter himself, had not thought it necessary to pass the news along. Had he known this he would have been saved a deal of trouble. As it was, he had to make a choice, oh, well—it would not be the first time that he had missed a noonday meal.

Mid-afternoon. The harness maker again stepped into his open door, stared into the dim interior of the stable, and suddenly made up his mind. He crossed the street and passed through the big doorway.

"Oh, it's you, huh?" he asked, looking around curiously.

"Nobody else," replied Mesquite pleasantly, looking up.

"I ain't seen Hankins around today," said the harness maker. "He ain't sick?"

Mesquite found a more comfortable position on the chair and grinned.

"No," he answered, and laughed. "He ain't sick. I'll give you one guess. What *you* think is ailin' him?"

"Damn' old fool!" said the harness maker. "Liquor'll be th' death of him! Why don't you stop him?"

"That's a little job I'm willing to turn over to you," said Mesquite.

"It can't be did!" snapped the harness maker with conviction.

"That's why I don't stop him," replied Mesquite, and laughed again. "Besides, there's another angle to work from."

"What you mean?"

Mesquite was about to answer when the sounds of a walking horse got his attention and he forthwith forgot about Hankins and the liquor problem. The sounds grew louder and nearer and he stood up lazily and lazily regarded the big front door. The shadow of a horse's head pushed out into sight on the hot and shimmering street, and then horse and rider partly filled the doorway and the horse stopped with half of him inside the stable. The glare outside was such that Mesquite could not see the features of the rider, but the silhouette suggested an old man. The rider swung from the saddle and dropped the reins over the horse's head.

"Give him good feed of corn, an' rub him down," said the horseman somewhat nervously. His throat was a little dry and it bothered him.

MESQUITE did not stiffen because he did not allow himself to do such things when they might constitute a mistake. Right now he was unbalanced, physically and mentally. It had been eight or ten years since he had heard that voice, but he had heard it under conditions which had impressed it upon his memory. Besides, he knew that the old man was in this part of the country. Had he come alone? And in a situation like this he had the damned harness maker on his hands!

"All right," he said, moving slowly, the light shifting and playing on the handles of his low-worn guns as they slowly followed the movements of his thighs and shifted forward and back. They were walnut, but oiled, and polished by handling.

"I'll be back after I freed myself," said the horseman. His voice had suddenly lost what measure of assurance it had had. He was once again face to face with one of the coldest, deadliest men he ever had known, and he was not at all sure that his note had been believed. To make matters worse, he had ridden in on a horse which easily might be considered stolen. He suddenly turned on a heel and walked slowly out of the door and out of sight.

"Well," said the harness maker, still looking at the big front door and puzzling himself about the identity of this stranger. "If you need any help with Hankins, call on me."

"Thanks," said Mesquite dryly. He watched the slow progress of the harness maker through the door and across the street. The damned old coot! He'd never offered any help before! He shook his head slowly and moved warily toward the horse, his hands dangling limply near the holsters, and he kept so closely to the horse that he crowded it. Nothing happened. He led the animal into the stable to take care of it. And then he froze.

Its brand was the Double Y! This was suspicious. No man working for Hopalong would ride into the company of cattle thieves on a horse wearing that brand. So Shanghai had reformed, huh? So had the devil, then, and all men were turning honest. He was almost sorry that he had bothered Hopalong with that letter, and had bothered himself to write it; but still, it was something which Hopalong should know. Because, knowing it he would automatically know that the game was not going to be a simple one. No cattle-stealing game with Shanghai sitting in would be simple.

While he thought, he was rubbing down the horse, and he began to laugh gently. One of the Double Y's prized animals, stolen and miles from home, being rubbed down by a friend of Hopalong Cassidy! Ha-ha-ha-ha! But while he rubbed and laughed he did not lose sight of the big front door; and the moment came when he again saw a shadow pushing out on the baked dirt of the street.

He stepped out of the stall and took one quick pace away from it to give his elbows plenty of room, and he let his swinging hands brush gently against the satiny walnut handles as he faced the big door and the street and took slow, short steps toward both. He should let Shanghai come to him, but pride overrode this caution even if the old man had friends placed with nice strategy and forethought. If the friends were there they would likely learn what two-hand shooting really was.

Shanghai stepped through the big doorway and stopped suddenly, as if he had been pulled back with invisible reins. The attitude of the man he was looking at was disturbing to such a one as he. He cleared his throat and swallowed with some effort.

"I see you know me," he said, trying to smile. "Where's Hankins?"

"Drunk in his bed," grunted Mesquite, his eyes slitted.

"That's good," said Shanghai nervously. "I'm bringin' you some news that he shouldn't hear."

"He won't hear it," replied Mesquite.

"I'm moving every stolen head to th' east'ard," said Shanghai. "Every head an' every man. Onto a hide-out range I've picked for 'em. When th' time's right I'll let you know. I oughta be able to tell you more Wednesday night, between eleven an' twelve. Right now every head an' every man is outside Twin River jurisdiction. By Wednesday night they may be in it. I dunno yet. I'll see you Wednesday night, anyhow. Keep Hankins drunk. What you say?"

"Shore; why not?" asked Mesquite, icy glints in his eyes. "An' I don't have to

keep Hankins drunk; that's somethin' he does for hisself. But you come alone, Shanghai, or you'll mebby find yoreself wrapped up in powder smoke. An' you tap on th' glass of th' first window on th' east side of th' house. Three, two, three. Like this."

Shanghai watched the finger tapping against walnut, watched it and listened to it. He nodded, and suddenly swore under his breath as he heard slow but heavy footsteps crossing the street. The harness maker was getting lonely again, or eager to lend a hand.

"Yes, sir," said Mesquite, leading the horse from the stall. "At twelve o'clock, sir. Well, he's all full of corn an' hay an' ready to go. Good luck, Mister."

"Good luck," repeated Shanghai, and watched the finish of the quick, expert saddling. The harness maker was just rounding to, to come through the door as Shanghai mounted, and the former leaped aside with unexpected agility as a bay thunderbolt set the board floor aquiver and shot out into the street, its rider bending low in the saddle and on the far side to escape being struck by the top of the doorway, a full five feet above his head.

"Great Gawd A'mighty!" shouted the harness maker angrily.

"Yo're right," admitted Mesquite and sat down upon his chair.

"He oughta be arrested!"

"An' yo're right ag'in," admitted Mesquite, laughing gently, "an' it shoulda happened twenty years ago or more; but it didn't." Then he again thought of how he had had a stolen Double Y horse in his hands and had let the thief ride away on it. Suddenly he became serious. Shanghai must have known that he would recognize the brand, and perhaps the horse, and yet he boldly rode it into Hackamore and into this stable. Why that almost seemed like—

"Hankins any better?" solicitously asked the harness maker. "Anythin' I can do?"

Mesquite slowly arose, placed two gentle but firm hands on the harness maker's arms, and slowly but surely moved him toward the door.

"Nobody can help him but hisself," he said, "an' he won't do that. Come back tomorrow, when he'll mebby be all right. So-long."

"Er, so-long," replied the harness maker and reluctantly made his stiff-backed way to his harness shop, where he angrily plumped himself down on his work bench with a savage determination to miss nothing which went on across the street. And it may be that his savagerv increased because nothing happened.

EVENING came and it was time tc eat. Mesquite forsook the chair, rolled the big front door shut, fastened it with the hasp, and then made his way to the rear. Locking the back door after him, he crossed the little yard with every sense alert, let himself into the house and locked its door behind him. Ham and eggs and biscuit made him feel better, and it was not long after he had redded up that he was in his bed and sound asleep.

Tuesday was uneventful and the monotonous hours dragged by without a visit from the huffed harness maker. The morning brought three customers who did not at all suspect how ready a pair of guns were to leap into close-range, quick-fire action against them. The afternoon brought half a dozen customers, and this sudden boom in business increased the alertness, if possible, of the lowly stable hand. So far, however, no one had taken a shot at him or even tried to. When eve-

ning came he took a handful of the weekly papers from the office and carried them into the house with him. All the day's customers had returned for their horses and ridden off, and it would not be necessary to consider them.

For supper he had beans and bacon and more biscuits, and made up and cooked a batch of the latter for the morrow. The beans had been cooking all day and they tasted good, plastered with mustard, to a man who had eaten no mid-day meal. He had been in the house only long enough, from time to time, to keep the fire going for the beans. Again he redded up and then, dragging a chair close to the table, reached for a weekly, read until he was sleepy, and then went to bed.

HOPALONG CASSIDY rode all day on a horse that would make any man proud to own it. Farrell must have picked the best he could find in Wild Run. The rider was faced with one of the longest unbroken rides he had made for years; he was horseman enough to spare his mount on upward slopes and yet cover the miles, and he did not want to get to Hackamore until an hour when most of its inhabitants would be indoors or asleep, and it would suit him better if it was raining like the devil when he got there; but there were no indications that Nature was on his side.

At noon he stopped for a longer interval, rested the horse and while it fed on bunch grass, ate his lunch sitting cross-legged on the ground. The same thing happened at supper time, and the horse looked fit to go on all night. If he did not have such good animals in the roan and the bay, the latter temporarily missing, he would be tempted to dicker for this horse when he got back to Wild Run.

Just about midnight Hopalong entered the town of Hackamore and he knew where the saloons were because all other lights were out. In his letter Mesquite had said across from a harness shop. The first harness shop he came to had no stable opposite it, although one shouldered it. The next stable lacked a harness shop across from it. The main street, which was simply the widening of the trail, yielded him nothing, and he turned and went back to the one across street and, of course, followed it in the wrong direction. It had neither stable nor harness shop. He turned again and rode back the way he had come, crossed the main street and kept on going. There was another livery stable, and it must be the last in town. Its sign, if it had any, was hidden by the darkness, but across from it was a harness shop. The horse kept right on walking and did not stop until the last building was two hundred yards or more behind, and then it turned to the left and stopped when some distance beyond the street. Its rider dismounted and felt a little thrill of pleasure go through him; this was something like old times.

Mesquite sat up in bed, steel and walnut in his hand. Again the sound came: *Tick, tick, tick, tick.* The damned old thief! This was Tuesday night and not Wednesday; and he had told him three, two, three, and not four. *Tick, tick, tick, tick.* A bit of stone gently tapping against the window, the window in the old man's room. He had told Shanghai which window was his. *Tick, tick, tick, tick.* Why four all the time? Huh! He though that he knew the answer to that; exact repetition was more likely to gain attention, to break in through the barrier of sleep.

He slipped out of bed, both guns now in his hands, and went softly into Hankins' room. *Tick, tick, tick, tick.* It was quite a bit louder, now that he was closer to it. All right, damn them; if it was trouble they were looking for, they had come to the right house to find it. He moved silently over against the wall, close to the window, and tapped on the frame and not on the glass. The curtain hid the glass and if he moved it that would have him spotted for a clean hit in the dark. For

a moment the silence was unbroken, and then he heard a low voice.

"Kid, it's Hoppy. I've got to hide my hoss. It's down th' trail a bit. Have th' stable door open when I get back—th' rear door. You hearin' me?"

"Yes," answered Mesquite, tingling with pleasure. He knew that voice as well as he knew his own, and liked it better. "It'll be open. I don't know if there's any danger, but don't get careless."

"Keno," said a laughing voice outside.

AFTER a minute or two Mesquite opened the kitchen door and then heard a low, quiet voice in the darkness. It seemed to come from the ground, and it did.

"All right, Kid. When you open it, stay inside."

Mesquite tingled again. If there was ever a workman, he had just heard his voice. Nothing overlooked, nothing neglected. He rolled the door back very slowly and it hardly made a sound, and he heard no sound from the darkness, either. He was about to announce that he was safely in the stable, but checked the words and kept his fool mouth shut; it would be just like telling a schoolmarm that twice two is four. How in hell had he made it so quickly? A little, warm surge of pride went through him; this was the man who had trained him, who had thought him good enough to train.

He heard it, the sounds of a walking horse; and then, *click, click, click, click,* with the same intervals, and like a gun barrel tapping gently against a belt buckle. He knew that belt buckle, the only belt buckle he had ever seen that had been sanded and hammered and painted a dead black. Why give some coyote in a poor light, Hopalong had said, a bright and shining mark in the middle of your belly? He stepped aside to let them enter, Hoppy and the horse, and then he reached out a hand and touched his friend.

"Gimme th' reins," he said, and suddenly had them as his friend stepped back to give him and the horse more room in which to maneuver.

"It ain't no Double Y hoss," said Hopalong softly as he slipped to the edge of the door. "It's brand is WF. Don't care who sees it, now, or when."

Mesquite smiled. He wouldn't care who saw the saddle, either. There were hundreds of others just like it, and it had no distinguishing mark; that is, not one that you would notice on your own hook. With money enough to buy the fanciest saddle that Cheyenne ever turned out, Hopalong chose the plainest he could find, and cared only for comfort and honesty.

The horse stabled and the gear piled against the wall of the box stall, Mesquite walked toward the open door.

"All right, Kid," said the low voice, this time from outside the stable. "Lead th' way."

Mesquite crossed that short distance between stable and house with a careless assurance he might have lacked if a squadron of cavalry had been there to protect him.

When he reached the door he stopped and turned on the sill.

"All right, start comin'," he murmured and in a moment stepped back and to one side to give his friend more room. Then he pushed the door gently shut and struck a match, and in its sizzling, greenish light he saw his companion glance swiftly at the windows and nod his head in silent approbation.

Then Hopalong smiled as the match flame changed its color.

"How are you, Kid?"

"Right snug, an' ready to talk all night," replied Mesquite, touching the match to the lamp wick and carefully putting back the chimney.

"That's good," said Hopalong, wearily. "We'll talk in th' mornin'. I sat up last night till near mornin' playin' cards, like a fool; an' I've had a long an' busy day. Which room is mine?"

XIX

MESQUITE sat up, pivoted, dropped his legs over the side of the bed and reached for his clothes; and then, thoroughly awake, he remembered what had occurred the night before, and listened for sounds in the other room. There were none. Dressing hurriedly, he went into the kitchen, started the fire and then looked into Hankins' bedroom and grinned at what he saw.

Hopalong, seated on the edge of the bed, was stretching out a foot toward a sock, and trying to hook it to him. He looked up and laughed softly. It was good to see the Kid again, good to be with him. He was going to enjoy himself if he had half a chance. He chuckled as a thought came to him; it was the old line-up of Mesquite and him against Shanghai and his kind. Not exactly the same, perhaps, but—well, perhaps it was. He'd know more about that a little later. Anyhow, he was here, and Mesquite was here, and that was enough for the moment.

"Mornin', Kid," he said in a low voice. "When we talk we want to do it low. I ain't supposed to be here, an' I've taken some trouble not to let anybody know I am here."

"Mornin', Hoppy," said Mesquite, following the advice, although he did not need it. "I'm shore glad to see you. You hungry?"

"Hungrier than the devil," answered Hopalong, and got the sock started toward him. "So you had to send Hankins up to Whit's, huh? Well, we know he got there all right because yore letter was mailed. You figger it's as bad as that?"

"I figgered that it might get that bad, an' I wasn't takin' no chances with th' old man," answered Mesquite. "I wasn't expectin' you or word from you for another day or two. How come you got here so damn' quick?"

"Mebby *I* thought it might get bad, too," grunted Hopalong, standing up and taking his trousers from a chair. "Mebby you can save me some time an' trouble by givin' me a line on Shanghai. I come up here to twist his tail. I don't like nobody to do any dealin' for me unless I tell 'em to. Likewise, th' bay is goin' back with me if I can find it."

"I had my hands on it yesterday," murmured Mesquite. "As to Shanghai, he'll be here tonight. I wouldn't be surprised if you found that you ain't in no hurry to take home th' bay. An' then you didn't give him that paper with yore name on it, an' that badge? I didn't put much stock in yore signature because there warn't nothin' writ above it. As a matter of fact, I kinda suspected that somethin' was writ above it an' had been cut off."

"Did *I* give it to him?" said Hopalong. "It'd be too much like handin' out a blank check, an' I never do that. So I'll give you one guess, an' you've already guessed it. How you fixed for money?"

"Got as much as I had when I started, an' a little more," chuckled Mesquite. Then he sobered and went back to the thoughts in his mind. "An' his bay hoss had a give-away brand, which was another thing that bothered me; you'd never send him or anybody else up here, right now, on a Double Y hoss. An' yet he was ridin' it open, like he had a right to."

"Well," chuckled Hopalong, "he didn't steal it. He just borried it. I've already said that I'm here to take it home with me if I can find it, an' don't have good reason to change my mind." He had now got to the point of putting on his shirt, and he did it. As his head emerged he said, "All I knowed was that he'd just

gone off som'ers. He left me a note, too. Gettin' to be a writin' fool." He laughed. "You reckon I'd send a man up here that I wasn't dead shore of? To mebby get you into all kinds of trouble? Hell, Kid, I wouldn't even a sent my deppety. Nobody but Red, Lanky or Skinny."

"What th' devil made him come up here?" demanded Mesquite with pardonable curiosity. "He hadn't oughta have no love for me!"

"He's makin' a fancy play, I reckon, to copper-rivet an easy job for hisself an' plenty to eat for th' rest of his life," said Hopalong, "a play he didn't have to make because th' job was his as long as he behaves hisself. I'm hungry; let's get breakfast goin'. Tell you all about it while we eat."

THEY got breakfast going, they ate it and all of it, and the matter was more fully explained and talked over. When they pushed back from the table Mesquite asked a question.

"What you figger to do now?"

"Stay holed up for awhile, right here in this house," answered Hopalong. "Holed up as tight as a badger in his hole. Shanghai may be tellin' you th' truth, or he may be lyin', but whichever it is it'll be th' best from his angle. There's somethin' we don't want to forget; all his thievin' life he's never thought of nobody but hisself, never trusted nobody but hisself. An' right now, if he's playin' square with us, whatever it is he's plannin' to do, he's doin' it for hisself first. I figger to stay in that room tonight an' listen to him talk. When he gets all through talkin' an' leaves I may have a purty good idear if he's lyin' to you or not. An' then I'll know what to do. An' now, hadn't you oughta go out to th' stable, like you allus do?"

"We won't do no talkin' here in th' house," replied Mesquite. "He won't want Hankins to hear what he's goin' to say, an' he don't know that Hankins ain't here. If I have him come in th' house he'll wonder about that. No, he'll tap on my window, an' then we'll do our talkin' in th' stable, with a lantern lighted but turned down, so I can watch his face."

"Shucks, Kid," said Hopalong with a laugh, "if he's comin' in to shoot you he can do that right handy when you step through th' door. He'll know right where to look for you, but you won't know where to look for him, out there in th' dark."

Mesquite chuckled and shook his head.

"An' you trained me," he said, reproachfully. "Well, I had two thoughts in my mind when I told him that. One was that he might be figgerin' to get revenge on me for trackin' him down an' arrestin' him, an' figgered that would be a safe play for him. That he could get me in th' dark before I knew what it was all about. Th' other was that he might not come alone. If he was scared to do th' job hisself, all he had to do was to tell that gang who I was an' why I was up here. They'd be glad enough to take th' job off his hands."

Hopalong nodded and smiled grimly.

"Go on, Kid; yo're usin' yore head. Go on."

"Well," continued Mesquite, also smiling, "when I told him to tap on th' window, an' he did it, that would put him in one special place. I'd have him located. He'd be at that window, tappin' to me inside, lettin' me know that he was there. But I won't be inside. Long before it's time for him to show up I'll be outside, doin' some scoutin' in th' dark. An' while he's tappin', and strainin' his ears for my answer, I'll know whether he's alone or not; an I'll be movin' up on him outa th' dark. I'll be in my socks, an' my gun will be on him. You see, I trust th' old thief, an' I'm dead shore that he's reformed. *Ha-ha-ha-ha!*"

"Yeah, I see that you do; just like I do," laughed Hopalong. "You got a head on you, Kid; but I knowed that long ago. All right, when you start out on yore scoutin' I'll get into th' stable, in th' box stall that will work out best. You know

where th' lantern's goin' to be, an' where you'll be doin' yore pow-wowin', an' you'll have to place me accordin'. An' it mustn't be where I can see him. I know that old devil. If I can see him, th' chances are that he'll see me. An' that won't do. All I want is to hear him talk."

He laughed contentedly.

"I don't know where we're goin', Kid, but I'm dead shore that we're goin' som'ers, an' we're goin' there together. An' that shore beats hangin' around Twin River meetin' two trains a day."

"Yo're right, Hoppy," replied Mesquite, his eyes shining. "Before I forget it—you got any special questions you want me to ask him? Somethin' that may help you check up on him?"

"Good, Kid! Yes. I'll be thinkin' 'em out durin' th' day. I'll be wantin' to know just about how much he's lyin'." He grinned. "But hadn't you oughta be out in th' stable, waitin' for business?"

"Hate to leave these dirty dishes," replied Mesquite, frowning.

"They won't be dirty when you see 'em ag'in," said Hopalong. He caught the look of protest on his friend's face, and chuckled. "Hell, I ain't no guest. An' it's goin' to be a long day, an' I'll be glad to have somethin' to do."

"This is gettin' to be like old times, Hoppy," said Mesquite, his eyes shining again. "You don't know how glad I am to see you."

"Yes, I do; but I figger yo're late on yore job, Kid, with all this talkin', an' th' customers an' mebby that harness maker across th' street won't know about our pleasure of bein' together ag'in. They'll mebby be thinkin', an' you never want to start folks thinkin' if you can help it. Clear outa here, you Siwash!"

THIS morning was like other mornings. A few customers brought in their horses and left them. Later on they returned for them and rode off. Shortly before noon Mesquite remembered that the food supply was running low again. He closed the big door and walked up the street, alert as a cat without appearing to be, and bought what he needed at the general store. He was not molested. On his return he went around the stable and into the little house, dumped the provisions on the table and locked the door behind him as a precaution that no one would walk in and discover Hopalong before he could get out of sight. As he turned from the door Hopalong stepped out of the bedroom and put more fuel on the fire.

"I been thinkin', Kid," he said. "Suppose some one of th' gang comes in an' wants to see Hankins. What then?"

"If it's anybody else, Hankins is dead drunk an' in his bed," answered Mesquite, smiling. "If it's one of th' gang, then I tell him that Hankins suddenly got near scared to death about somethin' an' cleared out. He wouldn't say what it was, but he did say he warn't comin' back, an' he sold me th' whole outfit for a dollar an' just rode away. That was a couple of nights ago. I ain't seen him since."

"Suppose they don't believe it?" persisted Hopalong.

Mesquite took the bill of sale from a pocket, handed it over to his companion and watched him read it. He took it back when it was held out to him.

"I don't know how good it is without bein' witnessed, but that don't really matter," Hopalong commented. "You thought it was good. But suppose they don't believe that?"

"Then we argue about it," said Mesquite. "Then I'll get mad for bein' regarded a liar, call 'em a name or so an' we'll mebby shoot it out."

"You mebby will," said Hopalong, and smiled. "That grub will smell better when it's cookin', an' I shore can eat my share of it. I'll pay for my keep by doin' th' dishes."

The afternoon passed as quietly as the morning. Customers came and went, and the harness maker solicitously asked about

Hankins, found that the old man had uncovered a cached bottle and was drunk again, and turned to go back to his shop.

"If he don't stop his fool drinkin' it'll mebby stop him," he said. "Why don't you take him in hand?"

"Mebby I will some of these days," answered Mesquite; "or some of th' bartenders in this town. That may be th' best way out."

"Young man," said the harness maker eagerly, "this town needs a marshal, an' I got a damn' good idear to call a meetin'. Would you take th' job?"

"I might if I was figgerin' to stay here," answered Mesquite with a laugh. "I'm stayin' only till I get me a stake. I'm a tumbleweed."

"You think it over," said the harness maker as he turned to leave. "I warn't foolin'."

"Neither was I," replied Mesquite and watched the old man walk away.

SUPPER over, Mesquite pushed back from the table and started toward the door.

"It won't be much longer now, Hoppy," he said with a smile.

"No," replied Hopalong, and then he looked curiously at his friend. He had had plenty of time to think about things, to run back and look at them. "There's one thing been puzzlin' me, among others," he said, thoughtfully. "Dutch Bill came to th' stable, that day, to kill you deliberate an' stop yore mouth. How come nobody bothered you after you shot him? How come nobody else tried to stop yore mouth? At a distance, say, with a rifle? Why only Dutch Bill?"

Mesquite thought for a moment and then old man Hankins' drunken words came back to him. Strange that he had not thought this out before. It might have saved him a lot of foolish motions.

"I remember now," he said, "that Hankins told Dutch Bill at th' corral behind Dalton's saloon. There was nobody there but them two." He paused a moment to follow this thought through. "Dutch Bill had a long, hard ride to make, an' he mebby figgered to shoot me as soon as he got back. Mebby he didn't have time, or a good chance to tell anybody else. It musta been somethin' like that, because if anybody else in that gang knew what I did there in th' stable, they'd have had to make a play for me. Or mebby he wanted to do it hisself to boost his reputation, an' warn th' rest of th' gang."

Hopalong nodded and glanced at the boiling dishwater.

"Yore last two thoughts was th' best," he said, and smiled. "That was yore good luck, Kid. All right; get out there in th' stable an' don't keep me from my dishwashin'."

Mesquite chuckled, turned on his heel and obeyed. He kept the stable open until the regular hour and then, locking up, went into the house and locked the kitchen door behind him. He turned up the lamp after Hopalong was back in the bedroom again, and sat and read for awhile. Then, putting out the light, he slipped through the door and faded into the darkness. After scouting for a few moments he returned, went to the stable and unlocked and opened the rear doors wide enough for a man to slip through.

"All right, Kid," said a low voice from the darkness close by, and the speaker slipped into the building.

"Fourth stall from this end," muttered Mesquite, "on th' right hand side facin' forward. There's a chair in it. See you later."

He stepped outside, closed and locked the door and again became lost in the darkness, lying down a short distance from the house, and flat on the ground.

Hopalong groped along the stalls on the right hand side and counted off four of them. He stepped through the door and felt about him. The chair was there and he seated himself on it and moved this way and that. The chair did not

squeak. Then he got up and moved about the stall and found that it, too, was silent. Following one wall, he found the chair again, moved it a little farther from the partitions so his holstered guns would not strike them if he changed position, and then sat down to wait.

One thing made him frown, if Mesquite should run into sudden trouble outside, he would not be able to help him, for the doors were locked. Oh, well, a man had to take his risks and do the best he could. He smiled a little as he thought that Mesquite's best was mighty good. Everything else being equal, he'd rather be standing in Mesquite's boots than the other fellow's.

XX

TO YOU and to me time would have seemed to have stopped; but to the man in the stall and to his friend outside on the ground, mentally disciplined and blessed with patience, the passing minutes held their wonted pace, and followed one another at their appointed intervals.

The night was dark, with heavy clouds filling the sky. Insects fiddled or buzzed or chirped according to their natures. And then a two-legged fox slipped along the east wall of the stable, enfolded in its protecting dark, and scurried across the small and silent yard. Reaching the corner of the house, he felt his way silently along it, each cautious forward foot feeling for twigs before it pressed against the earth, and stopped just short of the window. For moments he stood still and listened and then, raising a hand and stretching it out before him at the full length of his arm, he gently tapped a fingernail against the glass. Three, two, three. Then a pause. Three, two, three. And then silence. Time flowed on in the darkness and again he raised his hand. Three, two, three. And then suddenly he stiffened and a panicky fear tore at his throat and his stomach; a hard, small object was suddenly pressing against his side.

"Don't move!" said a low mutter at his ear. "You alone?"

"Gawd, yes!" breathed Shanghai, and closed his eyes for an instant. He felt his belt tug against his middle and he knew that he had lost his gun. Damn' the breed, they were too thorough!

"In th' stable," muttered Mesquite. "Th' old man is drunk ag'in, but not as drunk as he was at supper time. Th' stable's th' place. He can't hear us out there. Turn around an' get goin'; I'll be right behind you, treadin' at yore heels. If you whistle or shout, clear yore throat or cough you'll go to hell in a cloud of powder smoke. Get goin'."

Shanghai obeyed and made no more noise than a stalking cat. The big doors unlocked, one of them opened a trifle and the yard was suddenly empty. They closed again and a sharp click of a lock told that they were securely fastened.

Mesquite felt for the end wall, found it and leaned over. When his match lighted he was facing his companion, a naked gun gleaming in his hand. The green light sizzled and the green fumes stank.

"No light!" whispered Shanghai.

Mesquite calmly lit the lantern and placed it on the floor between them. He stepped away from the wall, a full pace or more out into the stable, but swiftly checked his companion's move to follow.

"Th' light's safe enough," he said reassuringly. "When I listen to a man talk I like to see his face. Sit down ag'in th' wall," he said, and as Shanghai slowly

obeyed, Mesquite squatted and then sat down and crossed his legs.

SHANGHAI settled himself comfortably, his greasy face now closer to the light. Before him stretched the dark emptiness of the long stable and the only sounds he heard were the occasional movements of resting horses. The scent of ammonia was strong in his nostrils and there lay the fainter but characteristic smell of harness. Before him, face to the light and back to the darkness, sat the man who once had tracked him down.

"Well?" asked Mesquite, pleasantly enough.

"Dan Lucey an' me are old friends," said Shanghai in a whisper.

"Don't whisper!" said Mesquite sharply. "Some of th' letters carry a surprisin' distance when you whisper. Talk low, as low as I am. All right, you an' Dan Lucey are old friends. Go on."

"All right," said Shanghai, his seamed, dirty old face almost hideous in the upslanting rays of the lantern. "He made a play last year—two of 'em. He worked it so that Hoppy made two wild-goose rides through th' wild country up in th' northwest corner of Twin River County. They was good plays an' cunningly made, an' Dutch Bill knew they was; but Bill was jealous of Dan, an' scared th' boys might make Dan boss. He said th' plays was loco, an' fought ag'in follerin' 'em up. Well," a chuckle, "Dutch is dead. You know that because you shot him, an' when you did that you gave good help to th' rest of th' boys. Dan is boss now; an' me an' him decided that them two plays wasn't goin' to be wasted, that th' follow-up play was goin' to be made. *He-he-he!*"

Mesquite said nothing. He just sat still and looked and waited, and listened for faint sounds outside.

"This year," continued the old man, grinning evilly, "Dan sent out th' same round-about call for help. Twice fooled an' too smart to be fooled ag'in, that was Hoppy's answer. He didn't make another ride. As soon as Dan was sure of that, an' he's had a man in Twin River watchin' Hoppy so he could be sure, why he got itchy to make his play. Then I showed up. He knowed that I knowed that country over there better'n any man in th' gang, an' he gave me th' job of scoutin' it an' pickin' out a new hide-out range. *He-he-he!* I didn't have to do no scoutin'. I knowed just where it was goin' to be. I made camp up in th' mountains an' waited for awhile, an' then went back again. I knowed where it was. An' where do you reckon it is?"

"I don't know that country well enough to even make a guess," answered Mesquite. "Where is it?"

"Box Canyon!" chortled the old man, and he laughed again. "Box Canyon! Two miles inside th' Twin River County line, an' th' best nat'ral trap for animals or men that you ever saw. There's only one way in or out—where th' creek comes out at th' south end. An' inside that canyon there ain't no cover for a fightin' man, just a smooth, grassy valley floor. Dan wants us to build two, three cabins right away; but cabins mean cover for shootin' men, an' I'm holdin' out ag'in 'em. *He-he-he!* I say there's time enough for them before snow flies an' that we oughta go to brandin'. There ain't no timber in th' canyon. When they get ready to build their cabins they got to go outside to cut their logs. An' if you can get word to Hoppy, an' he can get up there with a posse inside a week, there won't be a damn' thing for them fellers to fight from except bare, open pasture!"

"That's very interestin'," said Mesquite, tempted to reach out and take this traitor's skinny neck in his two, strong hands, "but I can't figger yore play, or why yo're makin' it. Did Hoppy send you up here?"

"No," chuckled Shanghai. "He don't know I'm here. He does know I'm off som'ers because I left him a note before I went. I'm figgerin' to surprise him."

"Why?" asked Mesquite.

"Because I want to show him that I'm a loyal member of th' Double Y. Because I want to keep my job an' mebby make some real friends. I'm an old man, Mesquite; an' old man."

"HOW do I know yo're tellin' me th' truth?" demanded Mesquite, coldly. "You haven't forgotten that I'm th' man who tracked you down an' took you in to Twin River. I'm th' man that really sent you to prison. Why should I believe that yo're up here to help me?"

"I ain't up here to help you," retorted Shanghai. "Only that you're a friend of Hoppy's. I'm up here to help him. An' mebby to help Whit Booth. We got some of his hosses an' they're damn' good uns. I want to stay a member of th' Double Y outfit, to keep my job, an' mebby earn me some real friends. If I had a grudge ag'in you I only had to tell th' boys that Mesquite Jenkins, friend of Hopalong Cassidy, was a hired hand in Hankins' stable an' snoopin' into their business. They'd got you as shore as hell. An' after Dutch Bill was killed, some of his friends was talkin' of pickin' you off with a buffalo gun; but I talked it out of 'em. I don't hold you no grudge, Mesquite. You was just doin' yore damn'dest, like I was doin' mine. With Hoppy's help you happened to be th' winner."

"How did Hankins get mixed up in this mess?" asked Mesquite after a moment's silence.

"He got mixed up in it because Dutch Bill said he'd kill th' old man if he didn't let th' boys use his stable. An' you don't want to make no mistake about Hankins; he won't live very long now. He knows too much."

"I'm not makin' no mistake about Hankins," growled Mesquite. "That's why I'm wearin' two guns. If they elect somebody to come in an' get th' old man, don't you let 'em elect you, because that man will be dead as soon as he makes his play, if not before." He rubbed his chin for a moment. "Just what's th' situation right now? Where's th' gang? Where's them hosses an' cows?"

"Just this side of Box Canyon," replied the old man, chuckling. "By tomorrow night every man an' every head will be in it. Send word to Hoppy for him to collect his posse an' start. They'll be all penned up for him, like a lot of hawgs in a sty, an' just as helpless if he does his job th' way I know he can. Surprise is th' whole thing. If he can get through th' entrance before they know he's there, they can't do a thing."

"How come yo're in town tonight?" asked Mesquite. "They know yo're here?"

"*He-he-he!* Shore they do," answered Shanghai. "They sent me in with four pack animals to get supplies. There ain't no stores near Box Canyon."

"YOU say you got some of Whit's hosses," said Mesquite. "How many? What brand are they in now?"

"They got near a hundred head of 'em," answered Shanghai. "They was in th' Long Diamond, but now they're hair branded into a Double X with a long bar through th' middle. They'll be burnin' them new marks in when they get more time, though they'll be so red and new an' swelled that it won't mean nothin'. They mustn't get more time; they mustn't build them cabins to shoot from. You got to get word to Hoppy an' damn' quick."

"I'll get th' word to him as soon as th' mail will take it," said Mesquite. "Anythin' more you want to say?"

"Nobody really suspects you," said Shanghai, "but Hankins will get shot just as soon as they have time to get around to it. You say he's drunk an' in bed?"

"Yes," lied Mesquite evenly, thinking that it was almost an honor to lie to a man like this.

"Well," said Shanghai, slowly getting to his feet, "when he sobers up an' wants to get drunk ag'in, don't let him go to Dal-

ton's. You bring it to him in bottles an' let him get drunk in his own house. An' that's th' place for him to stay. Don't let him leave th' house, not even to come out here. They *got* to close his mouth. You want to ask me anythin' more?"

"How'd you get Hoppy's signature, an' that badge?"

"I took 'em outa his little house. His name was signed to a letter he never sent."

"Did you know that badge was th' one I was wearin' when I got you?" asked Mesquite with a cold smile.

"No, by Gawd!" exclaimed Shanghai in surprise. "Was it?"

"Yes, it was," answered Mesquite, and laughed softly. "I knowed it by th' dent. All right," he said, getting up. "I'll blow out th' lantern, let you out, lock th' door an' go to th' house. I'll leave yore gun on th' top step. After I get in th' house an' close th' door you can come an' get it. I'll get word to Hoppy. See you back home on th' Double Y. Are you ready?"

"Blow her out an' unlock th' door," answered Shanghai. "I'm ready."

MESQUITE unlocked the door, blew out the lantern and then followed his companion out into the dark night. As he closed the door he clicked the lock, but it clicked just an instant before the door was quite shut, which meant that Hopalong could leave the stable whenever it suited him.

Mesquite waited in the house for perhaps ten minutes and then slipped out and moved quietly toward the stable. The door was as he had left it, and as he put his hand on it to roll it back a little he softly sang a line from Whiskey Bill.

"All right, Kid," said the darkness of the stable.

Mesquite slipped through the opening and pulled the door shut behind him.

"I was waitin' for you in th' house," he said.

"Wasn't no use for me to go in th' house," said Hopalong quietly. "I been thinkin', an' I'll saddle up an' be ridin' home in a couple of minutes. Trouble is I'm really two different men in one skin. Th' first is Hopalong Cassidy; th' second, th' sheriff of Twin River County, an' th' sheriff took an oath. Th' first would tell you to come on home with me an' let Shanghai go to hell; th' second has got to hold his nose tight shut to keep out th' smell, an' go through with his job. After all, it makes no difference to th' sheriff's office how cattle thieves an' stolen animals get into its jurisdiction. If they're there, we've got to look after 'em. An' by th' time I get back home they'll be there, an' they'll have Whit's hosses with 'em."

He paused for a moment and then continued.

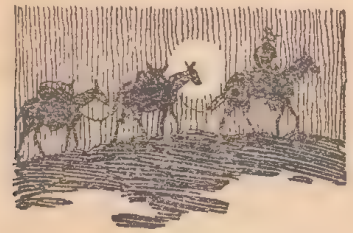
"You stay here an' act like you have been actin' till you get word from me. When you get that, you'll likely write up to Hankins an' tell him to come back here an' run his business without fear. Then you climb on yore saddle an' head for Twin River. When you write to Hankins, send word to Whit to send some of his riders down to th' Double Y, to drive home a herd of his hosses that we'll be holdin' for him. If he gets 'em there two weeks from today it'll be time enough."

"Then you figger Shanghai's playin' along with you an' tellin' th' truth?" asked Mesquite.

"I suspected that he was when he mentioned Box Canyon. It's a perfect trap. It can't be got out of, or defended from th' inside, ag'in a surprise attack. I'll be sendin' a couple of our boys up there to scout it out. If them fellers an' them animals are in that canyon I'll shore know what to do. Meanwhile, you set tight an' keep yore eyes skinned. An' watch out for Shanghai; if he'll sell out an old time friend, he'll shore as hell sell out an old time enemy—if it should pay him better. An' we don't know which play he'll finally decide on, which he'll finally think will pay him best because it's purty hard for you an' me to think like him."

Mesquite grimaced in the dark and then chuckled.

"I shore hope so," he answered, and chuckled again. "I thought you came up to take th' bay home with you."



"It's too far from here, an' he'd never make it," replied Hopalong, laughing softly. "Besides, he likes company. Reckon I'll bring him down with Whit's hosses. Well, Kid, I've shore enjoyed our little visit. Keep dealin' 'em like you have been till you get my letter. I'll just address it to Hankins' Livery an' Feed, an' it'll be in a Bradley's Livery an' Feed envelope. Beats hell how these liverymen like to write to each other! After that you'll know what th' hands are an' you can do what you want. Now we got to find that Farrell hoss an' get th' gear onto him in th' dark, which is no job to an old hand."

THE Farrell horse submitted well enough. Mesquite unfastened the rear doors and disappeared for a few minutes. When he returned he stopped just outside the door.

"All right, Hoppy."

As Hopalong passed through the door at a walk he reached down, gripped the shoulder of his friend and was almost instantly lost to sight, though the sounds of his walking horse seemed to linger a long time in Mesquite's ears.

Reaching Wild Run, Hopalong turned the horse over to Farrell, paid his bill and resacked his saddle.

"Wonder if you'll have somebody put th' saddle in th' baggage car of Number 6 this afternoon," he said to the liveryman.

"Shore will, Mr.—er—Jones," answered Farrell with a faint smile.

"Tell Murphy that its owner will come in an' claim it after th' train starts."

"Be glad to. How was Rick when you left him?" asked the liveryman.

"Sore as a pinched boil," chuckled Hopalong. "Rick an' me was in a poker game th' night before I left. He likes two pairs an' inside straights. He found th' goin' right tough."

"He allus did have them failin's," laughed Farrell. "Well, Mr.—er—Jones, any time you want another hoss you don't have to bother Rick for no letter. I've been through Twin River two, three times on th' train. Don't you ever miss one?"

"Not many," admitted Hopalong, and laughed. "Come on over an' I'll buy you some lunch an' a drink."

"I had my lunch at noon," replied Farrell with a smile, "an' a drink not ten minutes ago. Thanks, just th' same."

In due time Number 6 rolled out of Wild Run, and Murphy had leisurely closed the baggage car door. He heard the end door open, looked around and then grinned as he saw who his visitor was.

"That's my saddle, Mike," said Hopalong, pointing. "You figger you can toss it into a little patch of brush or weeds just this side of th' station when she's slowed down enough not to bust it?"

"An' on th' far side of th' track," said Murphy, grinning.

"Takes th' Irish to see through th' hole in a doughnut," said Hopalong, slapping the man's shoulder. "You've named th' side."

"Sure an' I know th' very place," chuckled Murphy. "Th' road bed pitches down to a large mud puddle. Look for it there."

"You show me a mud puddle this time of th' year anywhere near th' track in Twin River an' I'll buy you a drink when we get there."

"Oh, it's Twin River you mean!" exclaimed Murphy, and threw back his head and laughed. "You've saved it bein' pitched off at Sheridan."

"Just for that you don't get th' drink!" retorted Hopalong with a grin.

"A hell of a drink it would be on a three minute stop an' th' first saloon a good two minutes away."

XXI

BEFORE the train stopped moving Hopalong swung down from the steps of the smoking-car, which was nearest the baggage coach and, stepping back to be out of the way of any other descending passengers, looked down the length of the train as usual. This time he saw no one get off because he was the only passenger to honor Twin River with his presence.

The train jerked, and as it began to roll a certain Irish baggage master reached down from the open door of his car and forcibly jammed the sheriff's big hat down over that official person's ears. When Hopalong had pried it up far enough to make use of his eyes he saw a fan-shaped hand hooked by its thumb to the end of the baggage master's nose, and then dust, cinders and track litter blotted the man from his sight.

"Damn that Mick!" muttered the sheriff with a grin, and got the hat up where it belonged. He whirled and strode to the sheriff's office and caught his deputy going home early before that guilty person had quite finished locking the door.

"George," he said in a cold, level voice, "go to th' post office, get th' evening mail an' bring it here to th' office before you go home."

George grinned shamefacedly, grunted something, and went out to his horse. When he jerked loose the knot he used a deal more strength than was necessary.

Hopalong chuckled and walked down to Bradley's Livery and Feed, where he waited for his good friend Rick to return from the post office. Rick duly returned, raised his eyebrows at sight of his friend and dropped comfortably into a chair. Hopalong glanced out of the window, saw George dismounting before the sheriff's office, and grinned.

"It wasn't so bad, huh?" asked Rick in a congratulatory voice.

"Aces up," chuckled Hopalong, trying to forget the smell, and he laughed outright as his companion flushed at this cruel mention of his beloved two-pairs. "Mike Murphy tossed my sacked saddle from Number 6 just before we reached th' station. It's on th' far side of th' track. Ask Eddie to locate it just before dark, an' not bring it here until after it gets dark. Tell him there's a dollar in it. He'd put it on th' peg my other one is on."

"I'll see he does it, Hoppy," said Rick. "How was Farrell?"

"Fair itchin' to get you in a poker game," chuckled the sheriff. "He wouldn't sell me that hoss you was tellin' me about?" He shook his head. "Who told you it was for sale?"

Rick was silent for a moment, looking curiously at his companion, and then he nodded understandingly and glanced at the window out of the corner of his eye.

"I musta misunderstood him," he replied. "Soddy I made you go to all that trouble."

Hopalong leaned back and laughed contentedly.

"That's th' answer if anybody should start nudgin' you with questions about me," he said. "A man as smart as you oughta play a much better game of poker."

RICK grinned self-consciously.

"What you say we prospect th' sacred bottle?" he asked.

"Sounds like pay-dirt to me," chuckled Hopalong He watched his friend unlock the closet, produce bottle and glasses and then perform the mystic motion known as tilting. *"When!"* said Hopalong.

"What's th' matter?" asked Rick, quickly lifting the neck of the bottle. "You hadn't oughta be scared of this."

"I drink for taste an' not for shock,

these days," replied the sheriff. "An' there's more taste in half a glass th' way I handle it than there is in a tumbler th' way you put it down. Here's to yore great, great gran'parents."

"An' to yourn," replied Rick, and placed his empty glass on the desk. "You boys kinda played ring-aroun'-th'-rosie with me th' other night," he said, and his eyes lighted. "You stayin' in town tonight?"

"You better go home an' deal yoreself some solitaire," jibed the sheriff. "It's a better game for trustin' souls. I'm goin' right out to th' ranch as soon as I can saddle th' roan."

HE SLOWLY turned the glass in his fingers and watched it for a moment. Then he finished the drink and stood up. "I'll be on my way."

The lamps were lighted in the buildings when Hopalong stopped at the corral and swung down from the saddle. He took care of the horse and then discovered that Buck had robbed a branding crew for a wrangler. That person moved into sight, saw who the newcomer was and that there was nothing for him to do, grinned and went back into the bunkhouse.

Hopalong strode toward the ranchhouse and saw the door open. He groaned. Buck now stood in the opening and completely filled it, what with body, knees and elbows.

"Where you been?" asked Buck bluntly.

"I see you had to take a man from th' fires to rustle in a hoss for you that you won't use," said Hopalong.

"Where you been?" repeated Buck.

"Been off listenin' to Shanghai," cheerfully answered Hopalong as he stopped on the porch. "If I want to take a man from th' fires there's hell to pay."

"Shanghai!" exclaimed Buck.

"Yeah," said Hopalong. "An' he was dead right; th' job he went off to do just couldn't have been done by *anybody* but him. What I just told you is a secret of th' sheriff's office. You can send that man back to his wagon first thing in th' mornin'."

'Well, I'll be damned!" roared Buck loudly.

"That ain't news to me," retorted Hopalong.

"You get th' bay?"

"An' leave Shanghai afoot?"

"Hell with Shanghai! You keep an' eye on him or you'll lose yore pants," said Buck. "How you know you'll ever see that bay ag'in?"

"I know because I'm figgerin' on bringin' it down from Box Canyon."

"Box Canyon?" said Buck loudly. "What you mean? There ain't nothin' up there!"

"Yo're mebby right, at that," said Hopalong thoughtfully.

"How's Mesquite?" asked Buck.

"He's a hired hand in a livery stable an' layin' up a fortune. Anythin' left over from supper?"

"An' so you listened to Shanghai," sneered Buck. "Did you even see the bay?"

"No, but I heard about it."

"Hell," said Buck, enjoying himself. "You coulda stayed home an' heard about it. I coulda done that for you."

"That so?" asked Hopalong.

"Shore. You'll never see it ag'in. I'll lay you two to one you don't."

"I been waitin' a long time to burn yore hide," retorted Hopalong, digging down into a pocket for the money he had forgotten to put back in the safe. "I got two hundred right here that says to yore four hundred that it's a bet. Now lemme see you crawl!'

"I wouldn't bet ag'in you to save my life!" snapped Buck with indignation. "All I been doin' for near forty years is payin' bets to you! Not to save my life!"

"'Tain't yore life, Buck," laughed the sheriff easily. "There's too much Scotch in you."

"That so?" snorted Buck, bridling. "Then it's a bet!"

HOPALONG chuckled at how easy it was.

"Keno. Any grub left over from supper?"

"No, Hoppy," said a gentle, calm voice from the living room; "but you an' Buck come in and sit down. I'll have something for you right away."

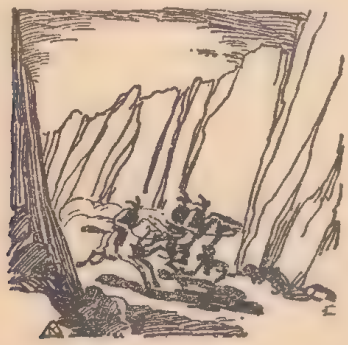
"Where you been an' what have you been doin'?" asked Buck, hungry for details. He led the way through the kitchen and into the living room.

"I've been up to Hackamore, an' I've moved a passel of cattle thieves an' a hundred head of Whit's hosses, not to mention quite a lot of cattle, over into my own legal jurisdiction. An' I'm goin' to hurt yore feelin's right soon, Buck. How's th' round-up comin'?"

"Comin' right along," answered Buck. "That's why I took that wrangler from his wagon, that you've been belly-achin' about. But what you mean, movin' cattle thieves over into yore own jurisdiction? I should think you'd want to keep 'em out of it!"

"Well, nobody else wanted 'em," replied Hopalong with a grin. "An' I knowed that Whit would like to get his hosses back."

"Hum!" said Buck thoughtfully, and then he turned a frowning face to his companion. "You said you was goin' to



hurt my feelin's: you been doin' that for nigh onto forty years. How you goin' to do it this time?"

"By takin' Lanky an' Skinny from th' brandin' fires."

"Like hell you are."

"Th' round-up, comin' along so good as you just said, we can take a man or two from th' wagons," retorted Hopalong.

"Hell! Th' man I took ain't Lanky or Skinny!"

"I'd be downright surprised if he was," said Hopalong. "I'm swearin' 'em in tomorrow mornin'. You wouldn't try to interfere with deppeties in th' legal performance of their duties, would you?"

"How long ago was it you put on long pants?" asked Buck with heat.

"Quite some years after you quit cuttin' yore teeth on yore thumb," retorted Hopalong.

"Why, you damned, bow-laigged, red-headed—"

"Supper's ready, Hoppy," said the gentle voice from the kitchen. "You don't mind if it's a cold one?"

"Keep right on talkin', Buck," said Hopalong, arising and slapping his partner on the shoulder. "I'll be back after awhile."

HE KEPT his word, and when he returned he drew a chair up close to Buck and talked for minutes. And then he ceased talking and leaned back.

"Great land of cows!" said Buck, and then he stiffened and his face grew dark. "Shanghai can't work for th' Double Y!"

"He's workin' for it now," retorted Hopalong, "an' he'll keep his job! I gave him my word; but, Buck, I don't believe he'll be able to stick it out."

The following morning Hopalong rode into Twin River and as he entered the town he saw John Rixey coming out of the general store. John mounted and swung around, saw the sheriff and raised his hand in salute.

"Mornin', Hoppy."

"Mornin', John," said the sheriff, kneeing his horse over toward his friend. "Rick Bradley was sayin' he wanted to see you right bad, *but not right now,*" he finished on a low mutter.

"I don't owe Rick nothin'," laughed John. "How's th' round-up comin'?"

"Right smart. It'll be over purty soon," answered Hopalong and drew up before Bradley's Livery and Feed. "So-long."

"Tell Rick I'll be in after awhile," said John. "So-long."

Hopalong rode into the stable and, dismounting, walked toward the rear. Eddie was washing and oiling harness. He took the dollar and grinned.

"Where's Rick?" asked Hopalong carelessly as he walked over to examine his saddle. No harm had been done to it.

"He stepped out for a minute, but he'll be back purty—there he is, now."

The sheriff turned and walked back toward the street, meeting the liveryman not far from the big door. He stepped close to him and talked in a low voice, preparing him for John Rixey's visit and for other things, Rick nodding from time to time. Hopalong laughed heartily over an imaginary joke, swung up into the saddle and rode from the building with Rick's laughter following him. Shanghai had said there was a spotter in Twin River; all right, let him spot and be damned.

LAST night's mail had netted one letter, which he read and tossed into the waste paper box. George came in from the corral in the rear and plumped himself into a chair near the desk.

"We got a job to do," said his boss, speaking softly. "An' we're bein' watched."

"Just what I was goin' to speak about," said George. "There's a stranger in town that's been keepin' tabs on you. Want me to go get him?"

"What for? He ain't done nothin' for us to pick him up. Let him watch an' you just act nat'ral. You stay right here in town an' do what you allus do. I won't be in for th' next few days—goin' to get my hand in at one of our brandin' fires. I ain't worked with a round-up crew for two years, an' I'm fair itchin' to join th' boys. What's th' stranger look like?"

"I ain't worked with a crew, neither," said George. Wish I could go along with you. Why, he's—by Gawd! *There* he is. goin' in th' general store!"

"So'm I!" snapped Hopalong and left, after a quick glance through the window. He had never seen the man before.

He entered the store calmly and in no haste. The stranger was looking at socks as the sheriff stopped before the patent medicine counter.

"Mornin', Hoppy," said the proprietor, showing more socks. "These are fifty cents a pair."

He looked up at the sheriff. "How are you?"

"I'm all right, but Buck ain't so well," Hopalong said, going around the counter and taking a bottle from the shelf behind it. "He eats like a hoss an' don't do no work. Put down in th' book one bottle

of castor oil. I'll see you after th' round-up is over."

"You goin' out to work with th' boys?" asked the store keeper.

"I am till Buck gets righted around," answered Hopalong and walked toward the door.

"It's about time you earned an honest dollar," said the store keeper with a chuckle.

"Ain't it?" laughed Hopalong and left the building.

When he got back to the ranch he stopped long enough to give Rose the bottle of castor oil to add to her collections of medicines and to talk earnestly to Buck for a few minutes. Then he climbed back into the saddle and kept on going.

LANKY was glad to see him but would not have said so for a ten dollar piece. The wagon was on the north side of the little valley and close to a spring. Dust showed where the boys were working the gather. The cook grinned a welcome and poked a thumb toward the coffee pot.

"Been savin' that for myself," he said. "You want it?"

"Yes," replied Hopalong, reaching for a tin cup. He drank and then turned to Lanky, who had ridden into the wagon to get a fresh horse and by now had shifted his saddle. The horse he chose was fresh in more ways than one, but Lanky climbed aboard and wilted it a little, and started to ride back to the boys on the circle.

"Wait a minute an' I'll go with you," said Hopalong.

"I ain't got all day," replied Lanky.

"You got all week if I say so!" retorted Hopalong.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

It sounded like an auspicious beginning, but they rode off stirrup to stirrup without any blows, and after a few moments Hopalong turned his head and grinned.

"Buck still workin' hard, runnin' this round-up?" asked Lanky.

"Yeah; he's wore out two pencils," chuckled his companion.

"You mean Rose has," said Lanky. "What you doin' out here?"

Hopalong told him to some length, and long before he got through Lanky was smiling.

"I'll take Skinny," said the wagon boss. "We got this job so near cleaned up that we can do without two full crews, an' let th' other wagons spread out a little to take care of what we leave for 'em. But ain't you gettin' a mite careless associatin' with that damn', double-dealin', treacherous skunk?"

And so it happened that Lanky and Skinny, with about all the grub they could hang on their horses, rode northwestwardly on the following day. Before noon John Rixey rode in from town and with him came six more riders. John was proud of the time they had made, but said nothing about the condition of their horses. The next morning two round-up camps were deserted, their wagons rolling ranchward, one being driven by the cook who belonged to it, the other by a puncher who had been hurt going down a rope. The other cook was riding with a bunch of rowdies, as he frankly stated, and had personal charge of four pack horses loaded to the scuppers with grub and tools of his trade. What he most terribly wanted to do was to go to the ranch, draw down his pay and pay installments on some saloon in Twin River without getting a deed to show for it.

"Reg'lar hand-painted, embroidered posse, this is," he said with heavy sarcasm. "Fancy as hell." He rode on for a few moments, buried under a mess of bitter thoughts. "Lot of blamed helpless invalids. Have to have a range cook to stuff their bellies. *Hell!*"

"What half-wit ever told you that you was a range cook?" asked Red, with a chip on his shoulder.

The cook had such good eyesight that he could see the chip, invisible though it was. He knew so much about Red that he shut his mouth and took it out on the pack animals.

XXII

MILES to the northwest of these two rolling wagons a large group of horsemen stopped late in the afternoon, unloaded the pack animals and prepared to make camp. Morning found them going on again, and again they stopped late in the afternoon and went into camp, but in this camp an air of expectancy became noticeable.

Cook was well along in his duties when a rider topped a rise north of camp and loped down the gentle slope.

"Here comes Skinny," said someone, and they all turned to watch him.

Skinny stopped and swung from the saddle. He was looking at the sheriff, and now he nodded.

"They're in there, Hoppy," he said. "Eight men besides Shanghai, about a hundred head of good hosses and two, three hundred cows." He was looking around the interested group as he talked and now he laughed. "Hell, why'd you bring an army? Th' old Bar 20 gang used to be enough to handle a thing like this."

Hopalong flushed a little.

"I brought enough not only to take th' rustlers down to Twin River, but also to drive back them animals!" he retorted.

"Drive 'em back?" asked Skinny in a rising voice. "Hell, let 'em stay there. Let their owners come up an' do th' drivin' themselves."

"There ain't ten men in this country can find Box Canyon, or ever even heard of it!" rejoined Hopalong. "Where's yore brains?"

"Not where yores are!" snapped Skinny. "Mine are right close to my hat!"

"Damn' if you ain't right!" retorted the sheriff. "Many's th' time I've seen you sleep with that Stetson under yore hips! Where's Lanky?"

"Waitin' this side of th' canyon," answered Skinny with a grin.

"Come an' get it!" bawled the cook.

EAGER for excitement, there was not a laggard when it came time for the human cocoons to unroll in the morning. Man after man awakened, got out of his blankets, rolled them hurriedly and placed them beside his saddle. They hastened off to lead in their picketed horses and saddled them on the edge of the camp. By the time they had their blanket rolls in place the cook was bellowing out his summons for breakfast, although not a man was more than thirty yards from him.

The cavalcade loped from camp with Hopalong and Skinny in the lead, the latter acting as guide.

"You say you thought you heard wood choppers just before you left Lanky?" asked Hopalong.

"Yes. Lanky was goin' to scout around an' locate 'em if he could do it without takin' too many chances of bein' seen."

"He can do it," replied Hopalong.

"Slick as grease on rawhide," agreed Skinny.

"Th' best time to go in that canyon would be when they wake up in th' mornin'," mused Hopalong. "It's too late for that now, an' if we wait for tomorrow it'll cost us another day. We'll go in at noon, when they'll be sittin' around th' fire an' stuffin' their faces. That means we got three hours to kill. Skinny, you take six men with you an' find Lanky. Tell him to get th' wood-choppers if they're cuttin' today. Get 'em without firin' a shot, an' I mean that. Tell him that we're goin' in that canyon at noon. There's only eight, all told, in th' gang; but damn it, they may be all outside, choppin' logs."

He thought for a moment.

"Take half of th' boys with you. An' get them log cutters as soon as you can. An' when you get 'em, keep th' choppin' goin'. Th' sound of axes can be heard a long ways, an' we don't want that sound to stop. Put as many of th' boys choppin' as them fellers are. Leave one man to watch th' prisoners while th' others chop. If they give him trouble he ain't to use his gun; a club oughta be enough if he's onto his job. Then you take th' rest of th' boys up close to th' canyon entrance.

If you get there first, wait for us. If we get there first you'll either find us or a guide. Get there before noon. I want to show 'em plenty of force, so they won't get reckless."

He looked back at the following riders and swung around again.

"Take th' boys that was with you at yore wagon, an' three of th' deppeties from town. Better start now, Skinny."

Skinny and his contingent pushed into the lead, the rest slowing a little. They had plenty of time. The rough miles rolled behind them. Minute followed minute and the tension slowly grew. The sun climbed higher.

Then a horseman appeared ahead and waved his hat. The cavalcade stopped as one man when it reached him.

"We got th' wood choppers," said Skinny, grinning. "Three of 'em, which is all they was. It's sweaty work, choppin' trees. They all had their gun belts off an' felt as safe as babies in their cribs." His grin grew widely. "If you want to see some rough-an'-tumble wood choppin', you come with me."

Low laughter answered him and Hopalong smiled.

"All right," said the sheriff. "That leaves six, an' one of them don't count. Come on, at a walk, single file."

THEY rode on for an hour and then Hopalong raised his hand, checked his horse and dismounted, the others following suit. Lanky and his crew were waiting for them and joined them. The enlarged party followed Hopalong among the boulders outside the canyon entrance and then, once fairly in the entrance, spread out slowly and cautiously at his signal.

Careful minutes followed and then Hopalong raised his hand again and pushed on cautiously as the others stopped. He crawled the last fifty yards and then looked out from behind the boulder.

Six men sat around a little fire, exchanging banter and relishing their food. Hopalong inched back behind the boulder and waved his arm. The slow and cautious line again advanced and again stopped, each man behind his chosen cover, each man needing only to take a step or two forward or sideways to be within full view of the men at the fire when they turned their heads. Then Hopalong stepped out from behind his boulder, both guns in his hands. As he did so the rest of the line followed suit.

"Up with 'em!" he called. "We're three to one an' we got you cold."

The six started and glanced around, and the hands of five were stealing toward their thighs; but the hands stopped and went slowly up. It was just plain suicide to make more serious use of them. They were helpless.

Hopalong and four men stepped forward and stopped near the fire.

"Get their guns," said the sheriff, and his companions obeyed the order.

"Cuff 'em," he said, and turned suddenly at a muttered oath. John Rixey

was reaching for Shanghai's hands as the old man backed away.

"Don't let him put them damn' things onto me?" cried the old man. "Don't you let him, Hoppy! Ain't he got no sense?"

Hopalong waved John back and as he looked around again he saw Dan Lucey's face. Shanghai, he thought, had made a mistake; but under the circumstances it would do him no harm. He promptly forgot about it and singled out the crew which was to drive back the horses and the cattle, told them to take their own time, and that he would send the cook and two of the pack horses to meet them. The rustlers had some supplies to help them out, and when he got back to the ranch he would send them more.

For more comfortable riding the prisoners' hands were cuffed in front of them, and in a few minutes Hopalong and his crew were riding from the canyon, the prisoners ahead of them. They picked up the woodchoppers and laughed at them. From time to time the riding order shifted.

Shanghai rode up to Hopalong's side and found that the sheriff's part of the conversation consisted of Yes and No and I Reckon, and some grunts. After a few moments the old thief dropped back to talk to Red. Red left out the I Reckon and the grunts. Shanghai let a few minutes of this go past and dropped back to talk to Skinny. All that Skinny said were the grunts. And then the old man thought he would try Lanky, and rode up the line toward that silent, alert person. For a mile or so Skinny had ridden at Dan Lucey's side, but suddenly wanted to speak to the sheriff. Motioning for John Rixey to take his place, he pushed up to the head of the line.

"Well, I suppose we're in for it," said Lucey quietly.

"'Fraid so," replied John. "You never shoulda come into this county. That's where you made yore mistake."

"No," drawled Lucey, carelessly as he watched Shanghai push past him toward Lanky. "That wasn't where we made our mistake—" He swung swiftly from the waist and his manacled hands seemed to fairly leap to Rixey's holster. There was a flash, a roar, and then John grabbed the smoking gun and tore it from Lucey's unresisting grip.

Shanghai pitched from the saddle and the bay horse stopped.

Lanky's heels struck the ground and he bent quickly over. Then he slowly stood up.

"Never knew what hit him," he said.

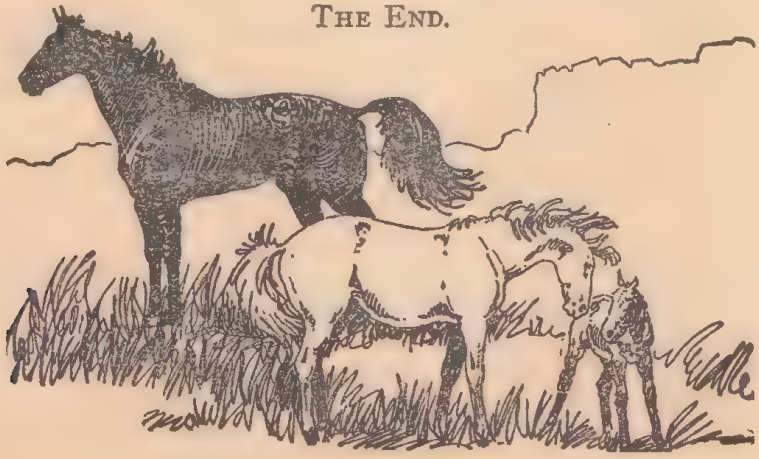
Hopalong reined in his horse and looked down. Instinct made him take off his hat.

"I reckon he's lucky," he said thoughtfully, thinking that a man who had betrayed a friend could never have held his job, never have stuck it out in an outfit where loyalty was a fetish.

Low murmurs of assent arose.

"You *think* so, huh?" said Skinny. "By Gawd, I *know* so!"

THE END.



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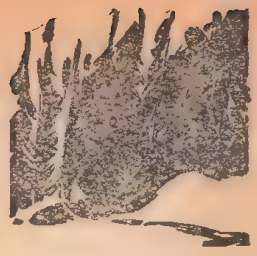

James Asasela—an Anomaly

FIJI JIM is dead.

This statement may mean nothing to you, though many of you who attended the World's Fair in Chicago forty-odd years ago have seen him. But to the dwellers of the gaunt, lone land that borders the frozen sea, it will mean much. The Mounted Policemen, the traders, the explorers, the Eskimos of the Arctic coast have lost a comrade and a friend. The manner of his passing will never be known to a certainty. Fiji Jim has gone to join the long list of kindred spirits who wait to welcome him into the Valhalla of missing men, whose last moments must forever remain shrouded in mystery—Sir John Franklin, Henry Hudson, Andre, Peter Bernard, Amundson—and a host of others who have gone to their death amid the thunderous silence of the Arctic. The North guards her grim secrets jealously.

To these intrepid souls—*skoals!*

Hark back to the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago, in 1892-3. Among the anthropological exhibits was a group of natives from the Samoan Islands, and in this group was a young man named James Asasela.

How he became separated from the others of this group I do not know, nor do I know why it was that, unable to speak or to understand English, he was forced, at the termination of the exposition, to seek his own transportation to his home halfway around the world.

Arriving at San Francisco, he wandered up and down the waterfront, homesick—his kindly dark eyes anxiously scanning the ships that sail the seven seas. But there were many ships. And many men. Sailors jostled the bewildered youth roughly, and longshoremen cursed him. Undiscouraged, he continued his quest. A ship had brought him from Samoa to San Francisco; and a ship should take him back.

Then, one day, on the deck of a small sailing ship, he saw some Kanaka sailors. Kanaka sailormen had often touched at Samoas. James Asasela could not speak their language, but he knew the breed—knew that the Hawaiian Islands lay a long step toward the waving palms of Samoa.

Believing that the ship was bound for Hawaii, he sought out the officers, and signed on—*for a three years' whaling cruise in the Arctic!*

At what moment James Asasela first realized his mistake is not a matter of record. The ship sailed north, past the Aleutian Islands, through Behring Sea, through the straits, on past Point Barrow, the northermost tip of the continent, and eastward along the bleak northern coast of Alaska, to winter at Hershel Island, in the ice-blocked Beaufort Sea, two hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle.

That winter James Asasela froze his

face and his fingers, and all but perished in the cold and the long dark. It was a far cry from the ice crags of the Arctic to the coral reefs of the South Seas—and James Asasela was homesick unto death.

The next winter wasn't so bad. Fiji Jim, or Jim Fiji, as he had come to be known among the whalers, had learned to protect himself from the biting cold.

WHEN the ship returned to San Francisco at the end of her three-year cruise, Fiji Jim shipped on another whaler, for another three-year go at the North. This time he shipped from choice. When this second ship turned her prow southward, at the end of her voyage, Fiji Jim asked, and obtained his discharge. He had learned to love the Arctic.

He turned trapper, and was extraordinarily successful. At times he worked for various whalers and traders. Sober, industrious, frugal—Fiji Jim became known as a good man among the hard-bitten men of the high North.

Vilhjalmur Stefansson first met him in 1906, and when Stefansson returned to the North at the head of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, seven years later, he engaged him, and for three years Fiji Jim remained in the employ of the expedition as a sailor and an Arctic traveler, than whom there was none better. After fourteen years' intimate acquaintance, under the most rigorous and trying circumstances, Stefansson speaks of him as one of the finest men in the North.

In 1917, Fiji Jim was beginning to show his age, His hair had turned white, but physically he seemed as good a man as he ever was. In that year Stefansson suggested to him that he should return to Samoa, invest part of his savings in some sort of a plantation, and take it easy. No one knew what Fiji Jim was worth. He would give a man in need anything he had in the way of food or gear, but in money matters he was frugal even to miserliness. His wealth, at that time, was variously estimated at from ten thousand. to forty thousand dollars.

Fiji Jim agreed that the plantation idea was sound, especially as one could hire manual labor in Samoa for five cents a day. He had visions of becoming the copra tycoon of Samoa.

In 1918, when the Canadian Arctic Expedition disbanded, Fiji Jim went to San Francisco with the intention of proceeding on to Samoa. He remained in the coast city for several months, meanwhile meeting a cousin newly arrived from Samoa, who told him that men in the islands no longer worked all day for five cents. This was bad news, and was undoubtedly a contributing factor in Fiji Jim's decision to return to the Arctic. The main reason, however, was that the few months spent in San Francisco had taught him that he couldn't stand the heat!

In the spring of 1919 Captain Pedersen took Fiji Jim north on his ship, the *Herman,* and landed him at Cape Bathurst, a bleak gaunt tongue of treeless land that thrusts far into Amundson Gulf in the heart of the Arctic. Fiji Jim had returned home!

Time passed, with Fiji Jim trapping, hunting, ranging the grim coast line, wresting a competence from the rugged North. In 1924-5 he had a trapping camp in the vicinity of Cape Parry, a remote region of the Arctic. In this vicinity, also wintered John C. Bishop, a native of Prince Edward Island, and his trapping partner. Bishop and his partner fell ill with scurvy, and not recognizing the disease which they mistook for rheumatism, they failed to take corrective measures.

In June, 1925, Fiji Jim, worried at not having seen anything of these partners for a long time, made the journey to their camp and found Bishop very near death, and his partner also sick. Unable to move them, he went for help. Somewhere in the Arctic waste he became stricken with snowblindness and lay out in the open for five days with nothing to eat. Later he

found some Eskimos, and sent them to the camp of the partners, where they found Bishop dead.

These natives buried Bishop, and took his partner to their camp and nursed him back to health.

AND now we come to the final chapter in the life of this man who forsook the palm trees and the booming surf of the tropics for the icebergs and the howling blizzard of the Arctic.

Established as a trapper on Booth Island, in Amundson Gulf, in the vicinity of Pierce Point, Fiji Jim made preparations for the winter of 1931-2. He made two subsidiary camps which he stocked with provisions. An old man, now—well past sixty, his amiable disposition had won the regard and affection of white men and Eskimos alike.

Late in the winter, rumors reached Constable Tredgold, in charge of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment at Pierce Point, that Fiji Jim had not been seen for a considerable time.

The constable investigated and found the two subsidiary cabins, as well as the main cabin, stocked with provisions but evidently deserted. In the main cabin he found a will, by the terms of which all property of which Fiji Jim died possessed was left to relatives in Samoa. The estate was handled by the Public Administrator of the Northwest Territories. In this cabin Tredgold also found a calendar with each day crossed off up to November 14th, 1931. This, then may be taken as the day of his death.

The November ice in Amundson Gulf was young and treacherous. In the absence of his komitik, or the remains of his dogs, it is surmized that the man started with a load of traps or supplies for one of his subsidiary camps and never reached it.

Somewhere along the trail the young ice gave way, and the dark waters of the Arctic closed over the devoted head of Fiji Jim. Then the ice reformed, and the secret of one more tragedy lies locked forever in the silence of the mighty North.

James B. Hendryx.

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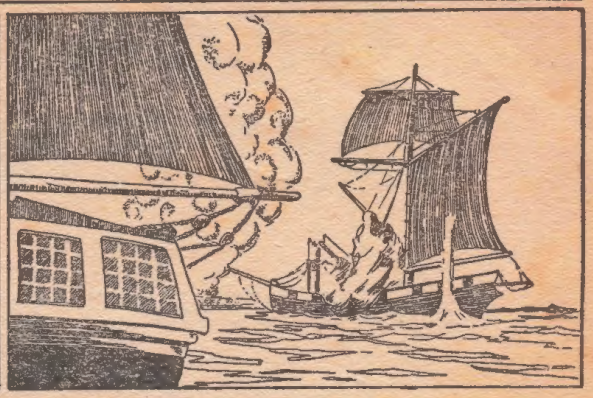
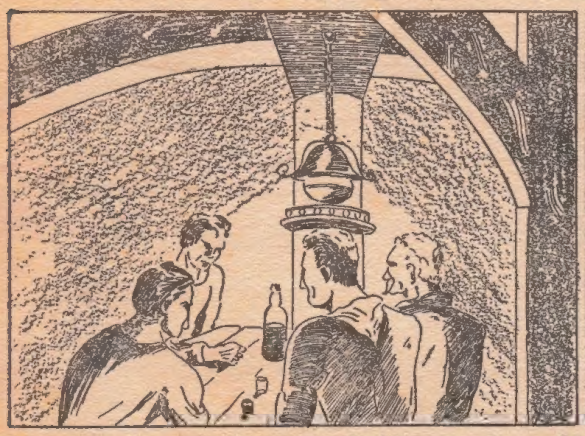
MEN SHIPS AND SEAS

BY J. GREGORY CLAIRE

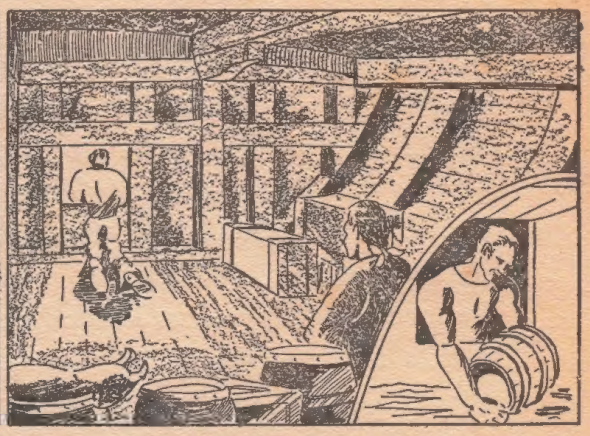
In the late 1700's the East India Company's TRUE BRITON sailed from England to India in the century's biggest trade . . . tea!



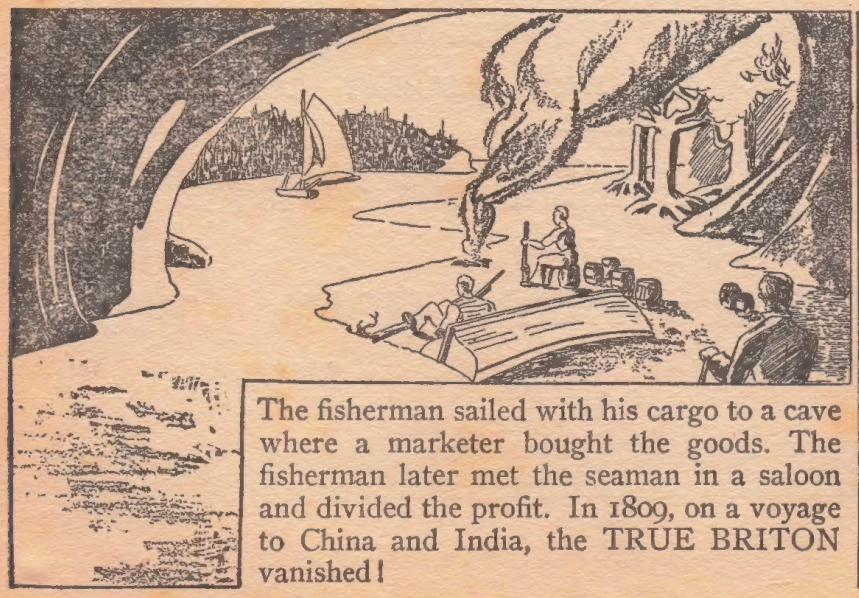
Off Africa a pirate ship swooped down, but a well-timed broadside dismasted the craft, enabling the Indiaman to escape.



Abroad the TRUE BRITON a shrewd officer formed a smuggling ring. As the ship drew near the English coast his men went into action.



One watched while another packed tea into casks, while a third set them adrift from the lower rear gun-port. A watching fisherman drew the kegs up in his nets.



The fisherman sailed with his cargo to a cave where a marketer bought the goods. The fisherman later met the seaman in a saloon and divided the profit. In 1809, on a voyage to China and India, the TRUE BRITON vanished!

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